

# Sermon for Feb 12, 2017 – “The Heart of the Law”

## Westwood First Presbyterian Church

### Pastor Jeff Colarossi

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, Year A – Text: Matthew 5:1-10, 17-37

There’s a story in Jewish oral tradition that’s told of Abraham. One day, Abraham invited a beggar to enter his tent and eat with him. It was a good Samaritan-type gesture, a love your neighbor type thing well before it’s time. So, the two sat down and Abraham began offering the blessing, thanking God for the food and so forth, when all of sudden the beggar began cursing God. He blamed God for causing his poverty and misery. He went on and on with his blasphemous irreverence. Naturally, Abraham was offended and irate. He immediately threw the man out of his tent and back into the streets. But then, later that night God said this to Abraham: “Abraham, that man has cursed me for fifty years and yet I have given him food to eat every day. Couldn’t you put up with him for at least one meal?”

So, on this Sunday before Valentine’s Day I want to tell you simply: Love each other. You heard me, Love each other, but not with the love that depends on chemistry, mood, or feelings. Not even with the love that depends on the behavior of others. I’m telling you to love each other with the kind of love that Christ refers to in today’s reading from the Sermon on the Mount. You know the kind of love I mean. I’m talking about the love that goes beyond what simply seems right, a love that goes beyond the “letter” of the law to the **spirit** of what God wants for us. I’m talking about a love that’s nurturing, a love that’s healing, a love that’s all about grace, peace, forgiveness. A love that values others regardless of who they are or what they have or haven’t done.

Someone once caught WC Fields reading the Bible. “What’re you doing?” asked the person. “Looking for loopholes,” growled Fields. Friends, with love there are no loopholes. No escape clauses. There are no codicils that say the deal can be revoked if this or that condition isn’t met. Love is total, unconditional, or it isn’t love at all.

Think of the words of Jesus we just heard, “You have heard it was said you shall not murder. But I say to you that if you are angry with your brother or sister you will be liable to judgment...” “You have heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery, but I tell you that everyone who looks with lust at another has already committed adultery...” “You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbors, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...” Yikes. No loopholes in Jesus’ words here. No compromises. No deals. What Jesus does is crystallize the issues involved in loving God and our neighbor so we can know beyond a shadow of a doubt just where we stand and exactly what we need to aim for.

Jesus is talking to a people that were used to compromising. A people who were accustomed to changing love’s demands as they’re found in God’s law to suit them, so that those demands would be easier to fulfill.

Jesus is sitting with His disciples teaching them what it means to follow in the path He’d have them walk. Jesus is giving words to the love song of God’s heart. All of this begins, more or less, with these statements of Jesus: “I have come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it...” And, “If your righteousness does not surpass that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.”

And lest this be lost to our modern ears, those scribes and Pharisees were some fairly righteous people at least with respect to the Law as handed down by Moses. What follows are the illustrations and implications of those statements. Jesus came not to abolish the law, but apparently to make it even tougher, more exacting. Jesus lists some of the big commandments... You shall not kill... You shall not commit adultery... You shall not swear falsely. And were that all, it'd make for rather dull preaching. "Yes, of course," the disciples would say, "We've heard that before. We know that's what God wants for us. Duh!" But then Jesus goes on to breathe new life, new relevancy into these commandments. He does so by explaining what they mean in their fullness, by going to the heart of the matter, literally **and** figuratively. He explains what they mean if we're to love as God loves because the law tells us what's in God's heart. It exposes God's fondest desires of how we should live together with one another. It also exposes how different **our** hearts are from **God's**! We need to think about that and then think about where we stand. Think about how we love others, how well we love others. Then, ask yourself: Is my love up to the standards set by Christ? Maybe you haven't killed anyone, but who have you called a jerk, a moron, an idiot...or worse? When was the last time that you got really angry with someone? What did that **look** like? What did that **feel** like?

Would it surprise you to learn, in letters written by both Peter (1 Peter 4:15) **and** Paul (Romans 1:29-32), that scripture actually places those who gossip in the same league as murderers? If you haven't committed adultery and felt good about yourself, what **have** you **wanted** to do? Does anyone hold a grudge against you because of something you did? Something for which you haven't apologized? What promises and vows have you broken? And then justified yourself in doing so? Maybe these aren't the best examples, but most of us only love a few close friends and our family...and there's times when we're not always sure about them! We greet those who greet us. We do good to those who do good to us. We lend to those who'll pay back. We welcome those who welcome us. As for everyone else, well – if asked – most of us have a reason for the things we do, and an excuse for what we don't do. But, as Christians shouldn't we be aiming to break through the limitations of our excuses? Shouldn't we be aiming to rid ourselves of any and all reasons that we might offer to justify treating one person differently than another? As **less** than another? You see, God sees us all the same way. He loves each of us equally. Sooo, shouldn't we be aiming to enter relationships with each other that are based upon our equality before God?

Friends, this is not an easy gospel passage. It isn't one of those "well-if-you-read-it-in-the-original-Greek-text-it-sounds-very-different texts." Believe me, I checked. There's no way around this lesson. No, we need to go through it, get to the very heart of it to get a glimpse of the heart of God, even as we listen to the heart of God. Today's gospel reading says a lot about what we would hear if we were to do this, if we were to listen to our own hearts and God's.

We know the joys of listening to the sounds of the heart. We've felt, maybe even heard, the sound of our own hearts beating in excitement. We know that listening to our hearts can give us a diagnosis, it can tell us whether our hearts are healthy or unhealthy. But we also know the heart is more than just a vital organ. "Heart" means the core of ourselves in all our most vibrant aspects. We talk about the human heart as the seat of love, compassion, tenderness, courage. Our language knows this: we say, "Take heart." If you have had a change of heart – you've had a shift of perspective, a shift of plans, a significant change in your outlook. Heart is the seat of memory...To know something "by heart" is to know it perfectly. Heart is the seat of yearning and desire...To seek with your whole heart is to search for something diligently, to strive for something with all the perseverance you can muster.

We listen now to the songs of our hearts and of God's heart in today's gospel lesson. Listening to our hearts **does** give a diagnosis. God listens to our hearts, doesn't He? Oh yes, God listens to our hearts, all right. He knows that even though we keep the commandment not to kill one another, we can still hate others. We're willing to kill our relationships with others, treating them as if they're dead to us. God listens to our hearts and He knows that even though we keep the commandment not to commit adultery, we can still disrespect others by treating them as objects, something less than fully human. God listens to our hearts and knows that even though we keep from swearing oaths falsely, we're still willing to manipulate others with our words. We're still willing to lie and mislead others by what we say. We're willing to let our words be meaningless, rather than let our yes mean yes, and our no mean no.

Even though we're made in the image of God our hearts don't keep time with the beating of God's heart. While God's heart sings out a love song begun in creation and sung to us still, our hearts fall far short. The diagnosis? Unfortunately, it isn't good. Our hearts are diseased. Unhealthy. Disheartened. And so in His mercy, God gives us law. In the teaching of Jesus, this is law that won't let our hearts fall short of loving as God would have us love. It's law that would have us love in a way that respects the dignity of every human being. And it's law that ultimately convicts us because it demands of us things we **cannot** do. And here again, the law shows us God's love by showing us our failing and driving us straight into His merciful arms. St. Augustine put it this way: "The law was given to make you, being great, little. To show that you do not have in yourself the strength to attain righteousness and for you to flee to grace." The grace of God is there, offered for us. We need only take it.

And so, our failure to love as God loves shouldn't be a cause for despair. No, it's a call back into the arms of God. A God who loves and strengthens us sending us out to love again. The God who bids us to love more fully, more perfectly. Because, while showing perfect love is impossible for us, nothing's impossible with God.

Here's the thing, the sound of our hearts and God's are different now. They're meant to sing the same song. So, we're given law, that we might know more fully how to love and when we fail, and we do, we're given the key to God's heart. We're given the key to the vast treasure store of God's mercy that stands ready for us to take. The key is the cross of Christ and it's the key to a heart that offers us true love and doesn't require chocolate, flowers or jewelry...Only our hearts. In fact, that's all God's ever wanted...

There's a story of an old pilgrim who was making his way to the Himalayan Mountains in the bitter cold of winter when it began to rain. He seeks shelter at an inn along the way. The innkeeper said to him, "How will you ever get there in this kind of weather?" The old man answered cheerfully: "My heart got there first, so it's easy for the rest of me to follow."

That is the lesson of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that we can meet all the demands of love, that are expressed in the law in one way, and only in one way, if we let our hearts go there first. It is two days before Valentine's Day and I urge you to let your hearts go. Love God and love each other as deeply as you can. When you do, you'll find that no matter how many mistakes you may make along the way goodness and blessedness will blossom along your path. When you do, you'll find that all that God has planned for you **will** come to pass. Take heart because ours is a God of love. Our God **is** love. In that we can be sure.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.

