

Matthew 5:21-37 - *Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*

Do you remember the first time you had your mind, your world **blown open**, -- when what you thought you knew was completely **expanded – amplified, magnified**?

The very first time I remember having this experience was in my 4th grade math class. Now, language arts, reading, writing - that's my sweet spot, my first love. I love the way words fit together and express ideas and paint pictures, I love the power of words, the potential of words. But **math**? – I had to work at math, puzzle it out, practice it. It was a language I didn't understand or naturally love.

I got + addition, - subtraction, > greater than, < less than, x multiplication, (although I still struggle with my 9's times tables), / division, fractions, ok. I got this. But the first time I had my **mind blown** – in a good way – the first time I LOVED the potential and possibility and beauty of math - was in fourth grade math class, when we learned about **exponents and powers**.

Bear with me. Any number raised to a power – that little *exponent* – that little number that hovers just to the right the base number – means multiplying a number by itself various times. 2 to the power of 2, or 2 squared is 4 : $2 \times 2 = 4$; 3 to the power of 3 ($3 \times 3 \times 3$) is 27 ; Ok, I can do that.

But here's where my world was **blown open**. I can picture $2 \times 2 = 4$, I can picture $3 \times 3 \times 3 = 27$. I can even picture $4 \times 4 \times 4 \times 4 = 256$ (about how many people easily fill this room). But then comes 5 to the 5th, 6, 7, 8, 9, and in just a very few numbers, when we get to 10, and what is 10 to the 10th power = 10 **BILLION!** 1 0 000 000 000 How do you picture 10 billion? – How do you get your mind around that 10 billion people, 10 billion gallons, 10 billion trees, 10 billion stars. – you **can't!** You can't picture the depth and breadth and width and height and weight of 10 billion **anything**. And in math – 10 to the 10th power is a relatively small number! @#*\$()#@*\$) !

And that's the **whole point** of exponents and powers, being able to name a number that is beyond your knowing, your picturing, your comprehending, -- numbers that grow, outward more and more, exponentially spiraling toward infinity! #&%&*\$(&* . World **blown open, expanded, amplified, magnified**.

The expanding heights and depths and density of space and time have always been a reality – but somehow the mathematic notation of some eternal truth – the numbers and a little exponents – raising a number to an exponential power – gives some sense and shape to the mind blowing infinite reality.

OK, THAT is what Jesus is doing in today's Gospel in this part of the sermon of his life – the Sermon on the Mount!. He's giving the sense and shape to something that may be otherwise incomprehensible.

Jesus says - In a world that says that the strong, the powerful, the religious elite, the ritually pure, the beautiful, the successful are BLESSED, because they seem to WIN, to TAKE, to HAVE it all - what does it mean to be blessed? Who is blessed? Blessed are the poor, Jesus says, the kingdom belongs to those who have nothing

Blessed are the meek, those who hunger and thirst, those who are merciful, who are PURE in heart, the peacemakers, those who are reviled and persecuted for my sake – these are blessed.

Minds blown - The people and the disciples– minds are **blown**, just as ours should be. EVERYTHING is turned on its head – the last, the least, are seen and heard and known and elevated to the full stature of blessing and worth and value and belovedness! It's an equation that runs in the opposite direction of everything we expect and everything that is predictable.

Jesus is laying out a compelling way of life - this way of love – that (as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry tells us) is not a sentimental love, not a shallow love, but **a fierce love** – a love that lays down ones life for another, that seeks forgiveness, that restores EVERYTHING that is broken, that repairs the **world**, that leaves out **no one**, -- this way of life, this kind of love is worth EVERYTHING!

And here's where Jesus gets specific – and really helpful. The people he was talking about knew the Jewish law – the Torah – 613 laws – the commandments - about how to love God and how to interact, how to treat one another. These were not a burden to the people. They LOVED the law! "Your words are a light unto my path and a lamp unto my feet. Your statutes are sweeter than honey, than honey in the comb." Jesus also knew and loved the Torah – and to be really clear, he said, I did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it.

And here – today, Jesus seems to be **raising the bar** – “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘*You shall not murder*’; and ‘*whoever murders shall be liable to judgment*.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘*You fool*,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.”

Let’s be honest, this teaching is really difficult to accept. I am not talking about murder part - most of us would never seriously entertain the idea of actually killing someone. I am talking about part where Jesus says compels us to refrain from anger. These are angry times. We live in an angry world. The worst of our vitriol and disdain for people who disagree with us is coming right to the surface. It is really hard not to meet insult with insult. It is really difficult to look around us, and to keep from saying “He’s a fool! She’s a fool!” These is a really hard teaching from Jesus. In this whole section of the Sermon, Jesus is saying – ‘So what if you follow the laws, keep every commandment down to the fine print, keep every letter of the law, if your underlying motive is not love. If your love of your neighbor and your enemy not in tact?’

But we face hard things. We are going to be angry. Anger itself is not bad. It can rile our hearts and stir us into action when we see injustice and maltreatment of others. Anger can move us toward justice. The prophets got angry when widows and orphans were abused and left to starve, when the strangers and sojourners were not met with hospitality. Jesus got angry and overturned the tables when the profiteers were exploiting access to the Temple on the backs of the poor. The problem is not the anger we feel or express when we see injustice. The problem comes when we are so angry that we then harm others; when we begin to target others – and malign them. The problem comes when we cease to see the humanity in the ones we are angry **with**; when we remain in our anger rather than allowing it to transform us. The problem comes when shouting angry insults – shouting ‘you fool’ – becomes our way of life – becomes our singular response. The problem comes when our anger begins to suffocate and kill **us**.

“*You have heard it said, do not murder. But I say to you, do not to be angry.*” Jesus is making a really bold statement here – that it is not possible to love God if we cannot love our neighbor - because anger has the potential of devouring me and my neighbor too. At least it has the potential of killing the humanity in both of us.

Equation: You have heard x ____ – but I say y ____ Its an equation that Jesus lays down over and over again. Why does he mean by that? Jesus is not replacing the Torah – he’s **intensifying it. Raising it to the next power.** Expanding, amplifying, magnifying it. I think he means something like following the letter of the law is way easier than the transformative full restorative way of life that God has been offering to you and unfolding since the beginning of time. And here’s the really hard truth – you can follow the law without having love.

Do this, Check

Do this, Check

Don’t do this, Check

But if we make the checklist our religion, we’re missing the point. At it’s heart Judaism is not about checklists and fulfillment of obligations. And neither is Christianity about dogma and rules. We’ve made it so small. So small. The fulfillment of the law (Torah) – the Beatitudes is found in something so much more expansive.

And following the rules is so much easier than what Jesus is pointing to.

He’s saying – double down. Turn up the volume! Expand, amplify, magnify! Go deeper, wider, longer, further! Follow the trajectory of GOD’s love, Jesus says, but love isn’t just another law – or rule. It requires practice. and mercy and compassion, and forgiveness at every turn. It is not about being perfect – perfection – it’s requires practice and cultivation of compassion, and humility, and vulnerability – and forgiveness. Forgiving others and asking for forgiveness – over and over again.

“*So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*”

That’s what we’re doing at the Peace – (it’s not a break in the service, or a chance to greet each other, although that’s nice). It’s a time to reflect on any difference, any strain, any break in relationship with a brother, a sister, a friend, and to reconcile with them before we go to the altar to share in the sacred meal.

This equation – you have heard it said ____, but I say ____ – is not a checklist. More rules. It’s a way of life – that expands and magnifies and amplifies our spirits in infinite directions. Beyond our comprehension and knowing.

And that’s the **whole point** of the spiritual equation Jesus gives us - - you have heard it said, but I say –being able to name a way of life that is beyond our knowing, our comprehending, Not a checklist, but a way of life - risen to the exponential power of love – that gives some sense and shape to the mind blowing, expanded, amplified, magnified reality of God’s love for us.