

Matthew 5:21-37

February 12, 2017

“Return to Me”

- when you listen to Jesus’ words in the gospel today, how do they make you feel?
- some people like to use the commandments as a feel-good checklist
 - one by one you smile and check them off ... done that ... done that ... kept that commandment
 - maybe I’m a little weak here and there, but still better than average
- other people use the commandments as a periscope
 - they spy on people and see how poorly everyone else is doing
 - that way they can feel good about how bad everyone else is
 - and if we’re honest, ... we all do it, ... and that’s sad
- I’ve got news for you ... Jesus’ words are not designed to make you feel good
 - you may think you are doing ok
 - you haven’t killed anybody
 - you haven’t robbed any banks
 - you can’t remember committing adultery
- but Jesus tells you that you have to go deeper ...deeper than you want to
 - do you harbour hate in your heart?
 - do you covet the nice things your neighbour has?
 - what about lust, or anger, ... or an unforgiving heart?
 - do your eyes wander?
 - is your tongue quick and sharp?
- as you dare to go deeper, you begin to realize that while you might keep most of your actions under control, your words and your tongue are most difficult to keep a lid on

-James 3:6-10:

“The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.”

-and if you think your tongue is difficult to rein in, your thoughts run wild
Mark 7:20-23:

Jesus said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

-Jesus’ words are not meant simply to make you feel bad, but neither are they meant to make you feel good

-they are designed to help you see reality and to flee from the reality of your sinful nature to the one place where you can find help

-there was brief news item this week in Toronto ...

-the help group for addicts called Alcoholics Anonymous, or AA for short, has been ordered by the Ontario Human Rights Commission to add another letter to their name

-they must now welcome a group called AAA

-Agnostic Alcoholics Anonymous

-that’s right, agnostic alcoholics must now be admitted into the fold

- for many years AA had resisted leaving God out of the picture, but now the group can no longer maintain that stance, they must now permit agnostic groups into their brotherhood
- given the basic principles of AA, I'm not sure how that's supposed to work
 - when they were initially rejected from the fellowship of AA, agnostics took their complaint to the Human Rights Commission to force AA to include them
 - AA had faithful claimed, and still claim, that overcoming addiction is not a self-improvement project ... they believe that your problems are bigger than you are
 - they are even bigger than you and me
 - to overcome addiction, you need a higher power ...
 - you need God
 - that founding principle grows from two realizations
 - I am not capable of fixing my own brokenness
 - and there exists a higher power who can rescue me
- here's what puzzles me ... on the other side, the agnostics are complaining that they don't need or want some "God" in the picture
 - if that's true, where is the help going to come from?
 - where's the hope for someone's hopeless situation?
 - either I will clean up my own life like a good little Pharisee
 - or I will be overwhelmed by despair because my life is beyond repair
- how do you see yourself and your life?
 - are you making some progress like a good little Pharisee
 - or are you overwhelmed by despair?
 - or, do you just ignore it all, cover it up, drown it?

- let's expand the question for a few minutes... if I'm a sin-o-holic,
I might be able to control my actions, at least in part,
- but my words are harder to reign in
 - and my thoughts and desires ... now we're getting into the impossible
- I very much need help from outside myself ... help from a source that is stronger than sin, and stronger than death itself
 - because that's where sin leads
- ask any recovering alcoholic what happened to alcoholics before AA
 - they died
- ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, what has been the destiny of all people?... they die
 - we grow old, we grow weak, we fight and kill one another ... on it goes ... death is relentless
- what is the answer?
 - let's look at what Jesus says...the question is this:
 - how much do you want to clean up your life, and how far are you willing to go in order to make it happen?
 - what would it take for you and me to cheat death and live forever?
 - simple test ... maybe you are not an alcoholic, but you are frequently preoccupied with sins of the flesh?
 - maybe you haven't been unfaithful, but do you talk about it?
 - do you think about it?
 - Jesus says, *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."*
 - so much for keeping that commandment

- consider King David in 2 Samuel 15 ...he sees the woman next door, and she's beautiful ... and she's naked
- and it doesn't matter that she is the wife of one of David's best friends and most loyal soldiers
- coveting happens ... lust happens ... adultery happens
- he's like a man possessed

-James says, (1:14-15) *"But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."*

- Jesus takes us one step farther ... he challenges us to go deeper and consider just how far would you be willing to go to avoid such sins?
- would you pluck out your eye to escape the lust of the flesh?
- or this ... you are envious of the nice things other people have
 - you want them too ... you would do anything to have them
 - the thought is called coveting
 - the action is called stealing
- would you cut off your right hand to keep yourself pure?
- what would you be willing to do in order to rid yourself of sin?
- now, there's something you need to understand here
 - did you know that cutting off your hand or plucking out your eye is not the cure for the problem of sin?
 - did you know that cutting off both hands or taking out both eyes isn't the answer either
 - amputation is not the way to salvation
 - if it were, and if I had to leave behind every part of me that sins, then how much of me would ultimately get to heaven?

-Paul understood it ... (Romans 7:18-19), *“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”*
 -if nothing good dwells in me, then none of me would get there

-even Alcoholics Anonymous knows that

-you can't cure the disease by treating the symptoms

-for an alcoholic, alcohol isn't the biggest problem, it's a symptom

-the biggest problem is a broken life and a sinful heart

-alcohol becomes the convenient go-to way to cope with that life

-I have problems at work ... I can fix that

-I can't deal with the trouble at home ... I can fix that too

-I have difficulties at school ... I can make them all go away

-I just need a bottle, or a pill, or a needle, or a snort, and suddenly the problems are all gone!

-it's like magic!

-the reality is this ... as broken human beings in a broken world, we all need help coping with life's problems and troubles

-we need the kind of help that will get to the root of the problem and not just mask the symptoms and make us feel good

-think about this part of the text this morning ... *“Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny”*

-is this just stuck in here at random, or does it connect with the rest of the text?

-here in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is leading us carefully and deliberately

-he wants to bring us to see the stark reality of our sin

-have you ever hated your brother?

-have you ever had lust in your heart?

-have you ever coveted your neighbour's stuff?

-have you ever told a lie?

-what do the Scriptures say about us as a result?

-St. Paul warns us (1 Corinthians 6:9-10), *“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”*

-in simple terms ... we sinners stand condemned before a righteous and holy God, and according to Jesus' words in our text this morning, the time to come to terms with this one who is the Judge of the living and the dead is before we stand before him in his court on the last day

-you and I need to get on God's good side, now, before it's too late

-the way to do that is in Jesus

-at one point in his life, St. Paul was convinced that he didn't need any help

-am I a good person? Of course!

-I'm a Hebrew

-I'm a Pharisee

-I'm faultless ... no fear of standing before the Judge on the last day

- God in his justice could have abandoned him to die in his sin
- but God in his mercy, did something quite different
 - the blinding light of Christ standing before him enabled Paul to see that he was not, in fact, a good person, but a sinner
 - and the grace of God showed him salvation
- in Philippians 3:8-10, St. Paul reflects on his self-righteous thinking and finally admits that he has been deceived
 - all the good he thinks he has done will not save him
 - he is not basically good
 - he is, like King David in the OT, “brought forth in iniquity” and “conceived in sin”
- then he turns to the other blessed reality ... through faith he has gained Christ ... he is found *in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith*
- danger comes to us when we look for help with our sinfulness in the wrong places
 - so, what’s the right place to look?
 - Paul understood that one too ... in Romans 7:24-25, he asks.
 - “*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*”
 - the answer is this ... “*Jesus Christ our Lord!*”
 - deliverance from death is in Christ Jesus
 - the way to come to terms with the judge while you are still on the way to his court, before it’s too late, is in Christ Jesus
- so here’s the real deal ... what are you going to do?
 - do you want to live under the stark reality of God’s justice?
 - or do you want to abandon all thought of do-it-yourself salvation and live under God?

- that's the question Moses put before the Israelites in our OT lesson today from Deuteronomy 30
 - on one hand there is life and good
 - on the other there is death and evil
- where do you want to live ... who do you want to live under?
 - we are born spiritually dead and the law does not bring life
 - the law accuses ... the law condemns
 - it cannot save us
- if your hearts turn away, and you do not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, you will perish
 - there are two paths to follow
 - life or death
 - blessing or curse
- the call and invitation is simple ... choose life ... Christ is our life
 - he is God's answer to our brokenness, set aside and marked as the sacrifice for sin from the foundation of the world
 - he's all we've got!