

These Are the Tricky Bits

Each week we use readings according to the Revised Common Lectionary. The RCL uses a three year cycle: Year A we hear Matthew's Gospel, Year B we hear Mark's Gospel and Year C we hear Luke's Gospel. Every year there are challenging passages that we, as preachers, want to avoid for various reasons. I decided this year that I would concentrate on the difficult readings whenever the option arose.

Today's gospel, from Matthew, is likely one of the most difficult, challenging us with Jesus' teachings regarding anger, adultery, divorce and oaths. Oh yea.

[deep breath]

Let's start with oaths and work our way through the others...

Jesus says "I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King." (Matthew 5:34-35, NRSV) In other words, if you have no intention of keeping the oath, it is better not to make it in the first place. Jesus is trying to save us from breaking our word, or oath.

Next, let's take a look at adultery.

Jesus says, "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:28, NRSV) Keep in mind, in Jesus' time marriage and adultery were considered differently than they are today. In Jesus' time, it was against the social laws for a man to be in the presence of an unmarried woman to whom he was not related.

Many of us have this idea that Jesus was faultless. He never made a mistake, never lost his temper, never disobeyed any of the ten commandments. And yet, when we look more deeply, we can see that Jesus did all of these things and more. Jesus was racist in his conversation with the Syro-Phoenician woman. She is begging for Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter and Jesus brushes her off telling her to feed the children first.

Jesus is referring to her and her children as dogs, who do not get to eat from the table. She challenges him by saying that even the dogs eat the crumbs from the table. And in realising he has been challenged, he rewards her gumption and heals her daughter.

To read the passage on adultery with twenty-first century lenses is to lose much of the nuance in which it is written. There were double-standards even in Jesus' day. When a woman was charged with adultery the man was almost always let off scot free, as though it were always the woman at fault. As the crowd is ready to stone the woman to death, Jesus stops them by asking only those who have never sinned to throw a stone. Of course, none of the people present are without sin...thus, none of them can actually stone the woman.

It's now time to tackle the passage on divorce.

In the twenty-first century, marriages fail at a remarkable rate. For some people marriage is treated as disposable. At the first sign of trouble they run away. Adultery, which is difficult to prove, even today, was not the main cause of marital dissolution. It was apathy. In legal terms it would be called "irreconcilable differences".

In the time of Moses, a couple were married by standing together in the village square, before witnesses, and declaring three times that they were married. Similarly, in the time of Moses a couple could be divorced if the husband, and ONLY the husband would stand in the village square, surrounded by witnesses and declare "I divorce you" three times. Women were not permitted to divorce their husbands.

Jesus sought to raise the bar on marriage, as it were, that when two people joined themselves together, it was until death. Divorce was considered impossible. Hear Jesus words, "It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."
(Matthew 5:31-32, NRSV)

Again, keep in mind that in Jesus' time, a woman did not have grounds to seek divorce, even if she could prove her husband had been unfaithful. As a follower of Jesus who has been divorced twice, I can tell you this passage makes me uncomfortable.

Does Jesus love me less because I've been divorced?

Do I feel that I'm an adulterer because I remarried after my first divorce?

The current defender of faith for the Anglican Communion, King Charles III was divorced from his first wife, Diana in 1996. He married Camilla in 2005, and he was not permitted to marry in Church. They were married at Windsor Guildhall, followed by a nuptial blessing by the Archbishop of Canterbury at St. George's Chapel in Windsor Castle.

Since 2002 the Church of England has permitted divorced people to marry in church, at the discretion of the priest in the parish. I'm making a broad assumption that his mother, who was then Queen, and thus Defender of the Faith, made the decision that Charles and Camilla would not be permitted to marry in Church. It is my understanding that she refused to attend the civil wedding, yet was present at the nuptial blessing.

It is also my belief that a wedding ceremony is not needed for a couple to be married in the eyes of God. If two people choose each other above all others, then in God's eyes they are married. Having a commitment ceremony, or wedding may make things "legal", yet it does not change what God has already seen and blessed.

And finally – anger. This is a touchy subject. As a child I was never allowed to be angry. I was allowed to be happy, and this was encouraged. I was allowed to cry, but only if I was hurt. And that hurt better be serious because if it was simply whining it would be greeted with, "you want to cry, I'll give you something to cry about". Anyone else know this feeling?

Anger was reserved for the adults in my family and usually only heard as furious whispers behind closed doors. Or uncomfortable silence on a tension-filled car ride home. Anger was not something freely expressed, and that seems to be, at first glance, what Jesus is talking about.

Jesus says, "But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; 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." (Matthew 5.22-23, NRSV) HARSH!

If you look deeper at what Jesus is saying, it's not that Jesus says we shall not get angry, but rather that we shall not pass judgement on another. Keep in mind, there were prescriptive sacrifices outlined in the books of Leviticus and Numbers. If you need to fill a couple of hours this afternoon, take a read through them and how specific they are with sacrifices from how the altar is built, to what kind of sacrifice is to be made and for what reason. It is quite detailed and, at times, complicated.

We know from reading scripture that Jesus did lose his temper, most memorably when he entered the temple during what we know as Holy Week, when Jesus "cleansed the temple". In Matthew 21, Jesus "entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers.'" (Matthew 21.12-13, NRSV) It is also important to remember that when these sacred stories were recorded they were not recorded with chapters, verses and section headings. These were all things added with time as the writings were standardized. When Jesus roamed the earth, the Hebrew Scriptures were printed on large rolls of hide, without verses or chapters. The scrolls would be taken out and read from, without specific reference numbers.

The first chapter and verse numbers were not assigned until the sixteenth century, meaning they are, relatively speaking, a new addition to the canon of our sacred stories.

I have preached about this before – there is an inherent danger in reading scripture and taking it literally. These readings are – at a minimum two thousand and at a maximum five thousand years old. Language and references change in that time.

If you asked a first century Palestinian shepherd what they did and you were to ask a fifteenth century Palestinian shepherd what they did and you were to ask a twentieth century Palestinian shepherd what they did there would be tremendous differences in how things were done.

Language evolves. In the late 15th and early 16th century, Shakespeare wrote the vernacular of the day. In the time of the King James Bible, 1611, it was written in the vernacular of the day. The “thee’s” “thy’s” and “thou’s” of this time were out of favour by the early 19th century.

All of this to say, language matters. Words matter. Language evolves and language is important. If we think about words we used as children, those same words may not be appropriate to say today. Even when we look at writings of the mid-20th Century, they contain language that is no longer used today.

For example, there was a time when “transvestite” was an appropriate way to describe a person who dressed as the opposite gender. As gender identity changed, evolved and sought clarity, the terminology changed. Transvestite is no longer used, rather transgender, is the proper use of the word today.

I was raised with the idea that being “queer” meant that you were strange or different, perhaps even weird. As a young adult, “queer” was used as an insult, a gay slur. Today, I self-identify as Queer. Queer is the best word to describe both my sexual preference and my gender identity.

This afternoon I am moderating a panel as the “Queer Out Here” conference comes to a close. The panel will be discussing the intersectionality of faith and sexuality. Forty years this conversation would have been unimaginable. I am hopeful that forty years from now, this conversation will be irrelevant.

When you read something in scripture that makes you feel uncomfortable or elicits an “icky” feeling, go back and read it again. Find different translations or paraphrases and read what is written there. Remember that the Bible was written in a very different time. Words then had different meanings than they do today.

And when in doubt remember that I take the bible far too seriously to take it literally.

Let the Church say, Amen.

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Sermon for Epiphany 6 – 12 February 2023
Sirach 15.15-20, 1 Corinthians 3.1-9, Matthew 5.21-37