

Matthew 5:21-37

Sacred the Body

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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21 "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' 22 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. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

27 "You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. 31 "It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 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. 33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' 34 But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let your word be "Yes, Yes' or "No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

I'd like you to take a moment to look at your hands. Notice the network of creases from all the places where your palms can bend and fold, and the blue veins that

weave an intricate web just below the skin's surface. Look at the larger veins on the backs of your hands. When I was a kid I used to think it was really cool when I could get the veins on my hand to stand out—now they stand out all the time, so I'm always cool!

When we're kids, we look at our bodies with wonder and amazement. Our bodies don't stop being amazing as we get older—we just look at them with different eyes. Critical eyes, instead of wondering eyes. It's as though we step out of our bodies and start looking at them from the outside, as objects. Objects that are never tall enough, thin enough, strong enough, fit enough.

And we begin to look at others the same way. As objects. Objects that can benefit us or get in our way; attract us or repel us. And the more we objectify other people, the easier it is to reject or exploit, manipulate or even murder them.

With Harvey Weinstein back in the news as his case comes to trial, we're given a stark example of the damage that can be done to lives and livelihoods, hearts and souls when we stop respecting the human being that dwells within each body.

That's what Jesus is talking about today, as he continues with the Sermon on the Mount. By this point, he's blessed the poor in spirit, the meek and mournful, the most vulnerable and downtrodden, and all those who suffer for righteousness' sake. He's called upon his followers to be salt and light for the world. Now, he continues to raise the bar of expectation, declaring that it's not enough just to refrain from physical actions against people—we have to be careful even about how we look upon them.

So, it's not enough to refrain from murder—we have to guard against our own tendencies to write people off with anger or demean them with insults, essentially destroying their humanity.

It's not enough to refrain from adultery—we have to guard against our own lascivious impulses that regard other human beings as meat.

Even his statement about divorce is about objectification. In the context in which he was speaking, men essentially held all the legal and financial power in marriage,

and women had very few ways to survive on their own—yet, divorce laws allowed men to cast their wives aside for any reason at all, leaving them vulnerable to poverty and starvation and physical exploitation. Jesus is speaking against men viewing women as objects that could be discarded as soon as they no longer pleased them.

But let's go back to his statement about lust, shall we? Because, why not!

When he speaks against lust, this is not Jesus being all tight-lipped and prudish about physical attraction. The Bible is actually very positive about physical attraction—there's a whole book, the Song of Solomon, that celebrates the joy of physical attraction between two human beings, and I commend it to you for reading to wrap up this Valentine's weekend! But what stands out to me in the Song of Solomon, which was written and canonized within an extremely patriarchal culture, is the mutuality it expresses. The lines weave back and forth between the voice of the man and the voice of the woman, each praising and longing for each other, each delighting in one another's bodies.

So what Jesus is talking about when he says, "everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart," is something else,

entirely. Lust is different than attraction. Attraction creates relationships, drawing two people together for the joy of both of them. Lust destroys relationships and people, turning the other into a plaything for the gratification of just one of them—even if you never even touch them.

Dr. Eric Barreto, who teaches New Testament at Princeton Seminary, makes the observation that this passage challenges “an assumption in too many Christian communities that it is the duty of women to shield their bodies so as to avoid tempting men. Here, Jesus teaches that it is the call of those who gaze, not those upon whom one gazes, to discipline one’s mind and desires.”¹

Thank you, Jesus!

Last week, I read the novel, *The Parable of the Sower*, by Octavia Butler. It’s Young Adult fiction set in an apocalyptic landscape (as is all young adult fiction nowadays!). The protagonist, a teenaged girl named Lauren, is trying to survive in

¹ Eric Barreto, ““Commentary on Matthew 5:21-37” on Workingpreacher.org (https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4371) accessed February 13, 2020.

that brutal world, and her survival is made more difficult by the fact that she has a condition called hyperempathy, which causes her to feel other people's pain in her own body. The book raises the question of whether it wouldn't make the world a better place if everyone had that condition. How much harder would it be to lash out at someone if you were going to feel the blows in your own body? How much less-likely would you be to kill someone if you were going to feel, in your own body, the pain of their death?²

And that's exactly what Jesus is calling for in his sermon to the crowd, as he stands there in his fully-embodied self on that hillside. He gazes out upon the crowd of people before him—men and women and small children, different nationalities, different skin colors, different body types, short and tall, healthy and ailing, upright and bent over—all those different people, those different bodies, seeing how they are suffering under the weight of a dehumanizing system.

It's what he's calling for as he feels the warmth of the sun on his own back and the green grass soft beneath his calloused feet, knowing that, before long, *his* body will be the object of rejection and dehumanization and brutality and murder.

² Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1993)

He's calling for hyperempathy. For us to feel one another's pain in our own bodies. To see and honor and safeguard the sacredness of each other's bodies, and of the full humanity of the souls that dwell within them. To go beyond righteousness, to seek relationship.

The singer-songwriter Lucinda Williams has a song, based on a poem of her father, Miller Williams, that she sings in her great, ruined voice. The song goes: "Have compassion on everyone you meet; even if they don't want it, what seems conceit is always a sign of things no ears have heard, always a sign of things no eyes have seen. You do not know what wars are going on down there, where the spirit meets the bone; down where the spirit meets the bone."³

The hands we looked upon earlier—all of our hands—have lifted heavy things, have experienced pain, have touched other people with tenderness, have muffled laughter and wiped away tears. Our bodies—all of our bodies—are where the spirit meets the bone. As such, they are sacred. May we each gaze with

³ Lucinda William, "Have Compassion on Everyone You Meet," from the album *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone* (Highway 20 records, 2014).

compassion, with empathy upon ourselves and upon our neighbors—empathy that can't bear to inflict pain or cause dehumanization. Empathy that recognizes the beauty and the scars and the mystery contained in the flesh of every human being. Empathy that goes beyond righteousness to seek relationship.

Because that's what Jesus did. And he has the scars, and the new life, to prove it.