



**Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, 2-13-2011**

Matthew 5:21-37

The Rev. Stephen Crippen, St. Stephen's Church, Seattle

"I-who-I-are"

As many of you know, in addition to my duties here at St. Stephen's, I work by day as a therapist, a counselor who works with individuals and couples, focusing on relationships. I help spouses and partners confront themselves and one another, build trust, resolve disputes, and everything in between.

Because of this—because of my day-by-day focus on relationship dynamics—I have to admit that I can sometimes be a restless wedding guest. Here's what I mean: when I attend a wedding, I hear certain well-worn phrases or vows, and I start to squirm. "You complete me," a groom might tell his bride. "Did you ever know that you're my hero?," sings the soloist. And she continues, "You are the wind beneath my wings." And I think, "Whoa. Hold on. That's not right!" After all, I'm a relationship therapist. I'm all about self-determination, self-validation, and healthy emotional regulation. If you "complete me," doesn't that mean that I was incomplete without you, and isn't that, I don't know, *wrong*? I feel much more comfortable with relationships in which both parties are taking good care of themselves, offering companionship and love to the other person out of a strong place of self-assurance and confidence.

And—I have one more beef about most weddings. There she is, the beautiful bride, walking up the aisle on her father's arm, taking her groom's hand as they approach the altar. A little bit later, they take their vows: they promise to love one another, to cherish one another, "to have and to hold." Okay. That's basically fine. And then they're pronounced husband and wife, followed by applause. But I'm sitting there thinking, Wait. What about the community that surrounds this couple? Shouldn't the *community* be part of the vows? Something like this: "I take you to be my spouse, to love and to cherish, to have and to hold...*and* I promise to share my life with you in the midst of our friends and family, parishioners and colleagues, mentors and elders, children and distant relations...and to draw upon their wisdom and support, all the days of our life."

I would love to hear a vow like that!

For it is *community*—life in community—to which we are called, and about which Jesus is speaking in today’s Gospel.

When we listen to the Gospel for today, we might think that Jesus is simply being cranky, or...he’s being a very intense rabbi. It’s easy to hear his words through our own cultural lenses—that Jesus disapproves of divorce, so much so that even to look at someone else with desire is a sign that you have sinned. Or...he disapproves not only of murder, but even the simple feeling of anger you might feel against your neighbor. I wonder if, as some of you heard the Gospel reading this morning, you wondered, Huh. This is not easy. This is hard to hear.

If so, then I want to reassure you, at least to some extent. I want to tell you that as harsh as Jesus might sound in today’s Gospel, what’s really going on is this: he is articulating a new way to live in community. He’s not just setting down harsh new rules about how we’re supposed to live. He’s saying that if we choose to follow his Way, then we’ll be practicing an entirely new way of being together as a community.

And here’s what I mean.

It’s hard for us to fully understand the time and place of Jesus of Nazareth, and the audience he was speaking to when he said these words, which are part of a larger set of passages that we call his “Sermon on the Mount.” But we know a few things, including this: divorce and adultery, for them, was not what it is for us. The Near East in the time of Jesus was an intense honor/shame society, with very tight rules about the proper behavior of men and women. In addition, men and women were carefully segregated, so it was never easy to conceal a sexual transgression. It’s nothing like our culture of co-ed workplaces, mobility, individual property, and privacy. And you can imagine the terrible position women were in when so-called “adultery” happened: after all, often enough, extra-marital sex was a way for one man to deliberately shame another. The woman was simply a pawn in the game, and the first one (or the only one) to be punished when the offense was discovered.

And Jesus says, No. Not for him, or for his followers. He didn’t articulate a radically new way of living—a fully egalitarian society of women and men living as equals and sharing everything. That community would come into being after his death and resurrection, as we see in the book of Acts. But in Matthew, we see Jesus articulating a more conservative—yet still reforming—position. He is discouraging the inhumane, antagonistic behaviors that were an all-too-ordinary part of domestic life in his day.

So...what, then, do we find here for us? I think we find an interesting question emerging from this Gospel, a question for our own reflection: what is going on in our own culture, our own society, and our own gathered community that we would call inhumane? In what ways are we putting each other down, exacting revenge, bearing grudges, and damaging the very humanity of those we know and love?

It can often be subtle. Let’s go back to that joyful wedding scene I mentioned before, the one where the happy couple made the mistake of inviting me, a crabby therapist, to their special day. Don’t get me wrong: I wish them every happiness! But I also know that many couples in our culture today don’t have anything close to the level of community support that they need. By the time they come to my office, they’re tired, isolated, angry, lonely, and strung out. They have smart phones that connect them in ways no one could have imagined before our era, but they lack a village. They don’t have a tight network of in-laws and cousins and neighbors.

One of the great blessings of my life is a deeply happy long-term relationship. And I know that a primary reason why Andrew and I are going strong at 11 years is our *village*—our many friends, our good neighbors (on both sides of our house!), our two solid families, our supportive parents, and our spiritual community. And I know that we are quite counter-cultural in this regard. So I worry about that young couple getting married. I'm hoping they'll remember how desperately they need a community to be happy, to thrive. And that they'll remember that their community needs *them*, too.

Gail Ramshaw is a Lutheran liturgical scholar who lives in Pennsylvania and writes about liturgical language, gender, and Christian ethics. In her book, "Under the Tree of Life: The Religion of a Feminist Christian," she reflects on the way we as Christians share a group identity. I am not just me, Stephen, an individual. I am also *us*, one among many with a shared set of stories, and a shared worldview. Ramshaw coined a term to describe this: she calls it not "I-who-I-am" but "I-who-I-are." Forgive my grammar, but I are a Christian. I are a deacon. There's nothing in our community that we don't share, as we shall soon see in our broken bread and single cup. So that means if I am isolated, or if I don't draw close to others, the fabric of our community starts to tear. If I insult you—or, to borrow a particular dilemma from Jesus' day—if I shame you, everyone is harmed.

Here's what Gail Ramshaw says about it. She reflects on the body of the individual, how my physical body is something that falls under the umbrella of Christian ethics, as does my individual life, and my needs. Then she describes the "body of the couple," how when two people come together in relationship—and I would include friendships and working relationships in this—they form a new "body." And then she says this:

"There is also the body of the community. The I-who-I-are includes not only my beloved one, but also my family, my beloved's family, our neighbors, our associates. As Augustine suggested by his trinitarian language of God as Lover, the Beloved, and Love, the offspring of the bond between the Lover and the Beloved is Love, a third of equal strength and beauty. The truth is that sexual relations do not remain private, enclosed within the couple. The intimacy shows; the potency extends its powers; there is that third dimension."

So that's why I wish wedding vows were a little different. I wish they opened the couple up to the community that surrounds them. And I hear in today's sayings of Jesus—from his own particular place and time—an invitation to all of us, an invitation to cultivate and receive the grace of God in our relationships, in this gathered community, and among all our relations, near and far.

You have heard that it was said, "You are an individual, with individual rights, individual identity, and an individual story." But I say to you, we are all, in the sight of God, the I-who-I-are, gathered into the community of the Trinity, the Lover, the Beloved, and Love.

Works consulted and cited:

John J. Pilch, "The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A."

Gail Ramshaw, "Under the Tree of Life, the Religion of a Feminist Christian."

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