

Sermon – Matthew 5:21-37
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“Tightening the Screws”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace in the name of God the Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. As you know, Valentine’s Day is this week, that day set aside to celebrate the loved ones in our lives. But who, you might be asking, was St. Valentine? As is often the case with saints of the early church, details are a bit sketchy. Legends point to Valentine, or Valentinus, being a third-century Christian bishop who was stoned to death, and then beheaded, and then buried quickly under the cover of darkness, only to be disinterred a few nights later so that he could receive a proper burial. The legends are unclear as to why he suffered such a gruesome fate, but I suspect that the answer has something to do with failing to give his special someone a box of chocolates and a fancy dinner. At any rate, I have a feeling that this is what would happen to me if I failed to fulfill my husbandly Valentine’s Day duties. After all, we all know that this is one of the laws of our contemporary society: If you’re in a relationship, don’t forget about Valentine’s Day! So we all do it, more or less. But does this really say anything about the quality of our relationships, romantic or otherwise? I mean, anyone can fulfill the law and buy flowers once a year. Is the baseline for a successful, life-giving relationship really that low?
2. There is a great deal of difference, after all, in meeting the law’s most basic demands, on the one hand, and living out its full implications, on the other. This is what Jesus is after here in today’s section from the Sermon on the Mount. Four times Jesus says something like, “You have heard it said...but I

- say to you.” As in, “You have heard it said that anyone who fails to give a teddy bear stuffed with chocolates shall suffer St. Valentine’s curse, but I say to you, anyone who fails to show love each and everyday in all of their relationships, well, it would be better for that person to be cast into hell.”
3. It is here that the full weight of the law comes crashing down upon our heads. We, for the most part, succeed in exceeding the low bar set by the commandments. Most of us aren’t murderers or adulterers (***and if you are, now would be a good time to stop***); most of us, if divorce comes, try to keep things civil; most of us at least attempt to avoid swearing falsely. But Jesus has not come to simply remind us to avoid the worst actions we could inflict upon another; he has come to restore us to the kinds of relationships that God has always intended. Avoiding murder is not enough, for when we are angry with a sister or brother, we, too, have sinned. Maintaining physical fidelity is great, but is undercut when our mind’s eye wanders after another. And so on. Jesus tightens the screws of the law, holding up a mirror in which we can see our true reflections, reminding us that when we say, “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” that *all* includes *us*. It includes *me*. That I am liable to the hell of fire; that I would be better off if I plucked out my right eye or cut off my right hand. That whatever rampant sin I see out there in the world, I would do well to pay attention first to my own.
 4. The screws are tightened as Jesus, far from preaching a cheap grace in which what we do no longer matters, proclaims that the law handed down from God applies even more deeply and broadly than we ever imagined. Truly, we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. But it is here, precisely and only here, that we find our hope. Acknowledging that we are unable to avoid anger or lust or imperfect relationships or false speaking, we are compelled to look to the One who can, Jesus Christ. And not only *can* Jesus fulfill the law, Jesus *has*, as he reminded us last week, done exactly that. Not for his own

sake, but for yours. In so doing, Jesus has set you free – free from the law’s terrors *and* free to fulfill the law’s purpose.

5. God, remember, did not give the law to the people as an arbitrary set of guidelines just to see if people could keep it, and God certainly did not give the law to delight in punishing people who sinned. The law was given as gift and guide, a means to know how to live in right relationship with God and with our neighbors, the whole human family. Anger, lust, divorce, and false speech are not bad in a theoretical way; they are bad because they tear apart of the fabric of relationships. They turn us against one another and drive us from the fullness of life that God had always intended and that Jesus has come to restore. This is why Jesus ties human reconciliation to worship; making peace with one another is an entry point to worshipping God.
6. Through Jesus, we come to see and appreciate God’s law for what it is: a gift given to create community. God did not bring the people to the Promised Land because they had kept the law; God gave them the law so that they could choose the ways of life once they entered the land. Even more, Jesus does not save us because we have kept the law; Jesus affirms and deepens the call of the law so that we can freely live out the life and the salvation gifted to us by the One who chose us and gives us to one another. In his death and resurrection, Jesus saves the murderer and the angry, the adulterer and the lustful. Jesus opens up new life for those whose relationships have become fractured and broken. Jesus removes the falsehood from our speech so that the very Word of Life can be upon our lips.
7. Jesus’ teachings today reveal the parental concern that God has for all of God’s children. David Lose, our recent cantata homilist, recounts a story told by his friend, Frank. When Frank was eight years old, he got into an argument with his sister. Soon, arguing became pushing and shoving, until Frank had pinned his sister and loomed over her, fist raised. And that was

how their mother found them. Told by his mother to stop, Frank stood up and declared, "She's my sister, I can do anything I want to her." The mother loomed over Frank and answered, "She's my daughter – *no you can't.*"

8. This is the power of the law for God's people, those who have been set free from bondage to ourselves and given to one another. God desires good for all people, and that means seeking the ways of life for all people, and not simply for me. This is why it matters for us to set aside anger and seek reconciliation. This is why it matters that we show love in all of our relationships, and not just on the days Hallmark wants us to buy cards. This is why it matters that we have hard and holy conversations about racial injustice. This is why it matters that we care for those who suffer war and oppression and not simply say about refugees and immigrants, "Not my problem." For all of these are God's children, too. As Dorothy Day used to say, "If each of us could just remember that we are *all* created in the image of God, then we would naturally want to love more." This is how we move from simply not hurting one another to actively knitting together again the fabric of the human family, with God at the center of it all

9. The law, Jesus makes clear, is impossible for us to keep, as long as we're trying to keep the law. We just keep sinning. But that's not the end of the story. God, in the name of the risen Christ, forgives you. God sees you and loves you. So see one another, and love one another. Put away anger and live for the sake of God's other children. In love, with love, living out God's law is not a burden to carry; it is a gift given that we may share the life of God with all people. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, today and forever. Amen.