

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Third Sunday of Easter- April 22, 2007

Scripture lessons: Psalm 148 & Matthew 5:27-32

LUST AND LOVE

We have to say it- this Jesus is fearless.

In his Sermon on the Mount he teaches us about life in God's reign, the life God means for us, the life eternal we come to know when we live in the love with which God loves us. When Jesus tells us about this life he doesn't indulge in any dreamy, faraway, pie-in-the-sky fantasy. He says that God's kingdom has come near to us *now*.

He connects it directly to our life *today* in the midst of all of our down-to-earth, nitty-gritty struggles and temptations. He calls us to reflect on what we actually do and say to and with each other. He focuses on the deeper spirit in which we think, feel, speak, and act.

Last week, he emphasized the importance of rooting out any anger or contempt we harbor against others. He stressed the need to go immediately to anyone we've done wrong to seek reconciliation with them. He's realistic about the fact that these things must be done in order to live the life God wants for us. He's matter-of-fact in his confidence that we can do them, if we will to do them.

In today's second Scripture, he continues by addressing issues of adultery, lust, and divorce. You can't get much more fearlessly down-to-earth than that. He begins, "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 lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

He had started with one of God's most basic commandments, the one against murder. He had uncovered its roots in grudging anger and belittling contempt to show what's more deeply at stake in the command against it. Now he takes the well-known commandment against adultery, and uncovers its roots in leering lust. He reveals the deeper meaning of God's command against it, as well.

His teaching on this was a great advance because the prevailing attitude towards adultery in his day reeked of a nasty double standard. The law against it was enforced almost entirely against women, seldom against men. Remember, for example, the well-known story in St. John's gospel of the woman caught in adultery. An angry crowd is getting ready to stone her to death. If she's been caught in adultery, the man must have been, too, but where is he? Why isn't the crowd equally inflamed to kill him?

It's likely they believed that the man's actions were the woman's fault. Their culture generally assumed that women bore the main responsibility for male lust, both for its arousal and for anything a man did in acting on it. Women, therefore, needed to stay out of public. They needed to be heavily covered when they did go out. They needed to stay separate from men. They needed to make sure they didn't walk in front of them. The onus was on them to keep men's lust in check because men couldn't do it, or so it was thought.

But Jesus thinks much more highly of men than they do of themselves, both for their sake and for the sake of women. God's Kingdom has come near to them, he says, so he's convinced men *can* control lust, that they are responsible for it. By lust, Jesus doesn't mean the simple fact of being sexually attracted. He knows sexual attraction is one of God's great gifts, one that can lead into a kind of loving intimacy that's one the best experiences of God we can ever have. Yet he also knows that lust is a very different matter. Looking at others and being sexually attracted is a fine and God-given pleasure. Looking at others "with lust" is adulterous.

The Greek translated in Matthew 5, verse 28 as "looks with lust" is like the Greek translated in verse 22 as "angry". It indicates an ongoing action, one that begins in impulse, but that's then actively pursued. Jesus is talking here about a continual leering, an indulged and cultivated

sexual desire that sees the other person not as a fellow human being with whom I'm meant to relate in mutual love, but as a sexual object, as an impersonal thing that I can try to dominate, possess, or use for my selfish, shallow, and distorted gratification.

This is apparent, too, in the Greek that's translated in verse 28 as "has . . . committed adultery with her". Our English idiom can make it sound like the woman somehow has joined freely in the adultery. But the Greek used here requires a direct object so that a more accurate translation is "has adulterated her" in his heart.

When we look upon others "with lust" we "adulterate" them. We treat them impurely by demeaning them. We relate to them as inferior to who they really are. We do the same to ourselves as we deform the good gift of sexual attraction into something much different and less than God means for it to be- which is why Jesus speaks so strongly in urging us to control lust.

He says, "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. 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 be thrown into hell."

Jesus is using hyperbole here. He's exaggerating. He doesn't mean for us to take him literally because he knows that even if we did it wouldn't do away with lust. I could tear out both my eyes and cut off both my hands and still lust after someone. But Jesus does mean to shock us into seeing how serious a matter lust is. He does mean to spur us actively to resist it.

He wants us to think long and hard about *when* we're tempted to lust. Is it when we allow ourselves to dwell on certain kinds of sexual images? Is it when we go ahead and indulge in certain sorts of sexual fantasy? If so, he says, "Don't do it. Cut off the temptation at its particular source. Know ourselves well enough to understand what tempts us, and then avoid those things." Jesus stands with Father Emil in Garrison Keillor's *Lake Woebegone* who says, "If you don't want to go to Chicago, then why get on the train?"

Realize again how highly Jesus thinks of us. He insists that we *can* root out grudging anger and belittling contempt. He's confident that we *can* act to reconcile with those whom we've done wrong. He firmly believes that we *can* resist lust despite the temptation to it. He aims to help us do these things by emphasizing how much is at stake in them.

Regarding lust, he knows that the kinds of messed-up relationship it can lead to both with others and within ourselves are dangerous enough to warrant speaking of hell in warning us against them. Facing up to the massive damage done by the molestation, rape, and other forms of sexual abuse so common in our society and elsewhere, can we doubt in the least that he's right to do so? What else would we call such destruction, except hellish?

In verses 31 and 32, Jesus goes on to say, "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."

In the culture of Jesus' day there was an ugly double standard not only in the attitude towards adultery, but towards divorce, too. Men were felt to have virtually unlimited rights to divorce, while women had few, if any. Deuteronomy 24, verse 1 was the key Biblical verse used in thinking about this. It speaks of a man being able to write his wife a "certificate of divorce" on the grounds that "she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her".

In 1st century Palestine, numerous rabbis taught that the "something objectionable" could be as trivial as her having burnt his food. Certainly if he no longer liked the way she looked, it was considered more than sufficient reason for putting her away. He could then legitimately pursue other women he found more attractive. He needed only to provide a certificate of divorce so that other men would know his former wife was now available to them.

Jesus openly challenged this double standard, too. In the Sermon on the Mount and later on more explicitly in Matthew 19 (verses 1-6), he teaches that marriage itself is sacred. God's kingdom has come near, so we know that marriage is meant to be a unique and sublime

expression of the love that rules in God's realm. *God* joins people in marriage, says Jesus. Through God's act, two people become one (Matthew 19:5). This bond is adulterated by anyone who breaks it except on grounds of "unchastity". Other rabbis were preoccupied with making sure certificates of divorce were properly delivered, even if they were prompted only by a man's slightest whim. Jesus centered on the more basic issue- keeping marriage strong.

In our day, that continues to be as big a challenge as ever. Why is that? The reasons, I'm sure, are many, varied, and complex but in closing I'd like to highlight one in particular.

For many of us now, I think marriage may have become the only place where we any longer expect to have a relationship with another human being that's lasting, deep, and whole. In a society as mobile and fast-paced as ours, all other relationships tend to be shallow, short-lived, and fragmented. In them, we share only bits and pieces of ourselves and only for a little while. Most of who we really are- our deepest hopes and aspirations, fears and hurts- remain hidden away, often even from ourselves.

Ironically, this can lead us to expect far more from our spouses than marriage actually calls for. In marriage, we promise to seek the welfare of our beloved in every dimension of her or his life. In mutually doing that for each other we who are two become one. We become one while remaining two which is the essence of the communion marriage is meant to be.

But when we get married with the expectation that this is *the* one person in all of my life who will truly know and care for me, we can easily find ourselves demanding *union* from rather than *communion* with our spouse. I discover myself expecting him or her to identify so strongly with me that I no longer allow any real independence. I expect my spouse to act more like my servant than my partner. With my need so great I may take any failure or refusal on her or his part to serve my need as a sign that our marriage isn't "working out"- which can make me want to pursue someone else who I dreamily think might serve my need better.

Because of the intense need and expectation that more of us tend to bring into marriages these days, extra support *is* needed for keeping them together. We need *communities* who can help us understand that marriage aims for the true communion of partners. We need communities that help us get ready for the challenges of living into that communion before we make our vows. We need communities who know that once our vows are made commitment to this kind of partnership requires staying together through thick and thin, even when it's very hard. We need communities who know that it often will be terribly hard because we *never* marry the right person. We *always* marry someone who because of inevitable changes turns out to be someone we didn't know before. We need communities with the resources to strengthen us to stay faithful to our changing spouses, in spite of the sometimes heavy burden. And we need communities wise enough to help us discern when the extraordinary time may have come when, paradoxically, we might need to divorce in order to remain faithful.

Communities of that kind are hard to find. But they're exactly the kind of community the church of Jesus Christ is meant to be. Faithful to the vision of marriage that Jesus gives, we can witness to the vital importance of carefully preparing for and then keeping our marriage vows. We can help each other stay true to them by learning together how to enter more deeply into communion with the wrong person who is our spouse. We can provide an intimate fellowship of the Holy Spirit in which we can have friends along with our spouse with whom we also can share more and more of who we really are- more of our deepest and truest hopes and aspirations, hurts and fears. From those friends we can receive the support we need to strengthen the communion we have with our spouse even during the toughest times of change.

With some of his most famous words, William Shakespeare once described beautifully the kind of faithful love that's at the heart of marriage:

"Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds . . .

O, no, it is an ever-fixed mark,

That looks on tempests and is never shaken . . .

Love's not Time's fool . . .

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom
If this be error, and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no (one) ever loved.”

That’s the kind of married love to which Jesus calls us. It’s the kind of love with which God loves us and with which Christ loves the church. It’s the kind of love a faithful Christian community is called to inspire and sustain. By God’s amazing grace, may it be so with us. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff