

February 12, 2017 - 6th Sunday after Epiphany - Reading: Matthew 5: 21-37

St. Mark's Anglican Church – Halifax, Nova Scotia – The Rev. John K. Morrell

In the records of Christian saints, there are eight men whose names begin with Valentine, seven whose feast day falls on February 14th. The two most important ones we remember both lived in the 3rd century (a priest beheaded in Rome and the bishop of Terni).

According to legend, Valentine's Day takes its name from a young Christian priest who lived in ancient Rome. Like so many other early Christians, Valentine had been imprisoned because of his faith. He often thought longingly of his loved ones and wanted to assure them that he loved them and he was okay. Beyond his cell window, just within reach, grew a cluster of violets. He picked some of the heart-shaped leaves and pricked them with the words "*Remember your Valentine*" and sent them off by a friendly dove. He continued sending messages that simply said "*I love you.*" And so, through the ages, people send Valentines to express their love to family and friends,

The particular Gospel reading for this Sunday does not always occur around Valentine's Day. They also may occur around Mother's Day in May. Because Easter moves between March 22 and April 25, the ancient organizers of our lectionary adjust the Sundays after Epiphany and the Sundays after Pentecost to reflect the date of Easter each year. This year Easter is 3 weeks later than last year so we have 3 additional Sundays after Epiphany and 3 less Sundays after Pentecost.

Just in time for Valentine's Day, Jesus, through the Gospel for this Sunday gives us a gift of four love lessons. They may not seem so at first – this reading may seem over the top –if you are angry with your brother you are condemned to hell fire; pluck out your sinful eye or cut off your sinful hand; divorce is only an option if the wife has committed adultery; and swearing an oath is forbidden.

These lessons are not your usual sweet and sentimental Valentine, but real life directions for better relationships. Jesus says love shows no hostility, is not predatory, is faithful and is unconditionally truthful. It is a gift that will deepen the love we share with everyone.

This passage of scripture is actually all about how to have right relationship with each other and with God. Jesus frequently uses everyday and practical examples to show one must not just obey the laws literally, but must go behind the laws for the greater understanding of God's relationships with us.

THE FIRST LOVE LESSON - Love should not show Hostility or Anger.

²¹ 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." ²² 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^l 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.

First, Jesus says "love shows no hostility," (v. 21-26). The law stated, "do not murder." Jesus expands that idea to say, "don't be angry, don't call others contemptible names, and be united with those around you, even if you have to leave worship or run up to your adversary before court begins." He was calling people to make sincere efforts to heal the rifts between them. Jesus was saying the anger that leads to murder needs to be "nipped in the bud." Love does that. It smooths over a variety of hurts.

THE SECOND LOVE LESSON - Love Is Not Predatory

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.

The law said "do not commit adultery." Jesus takes the issue to the root cause of adultery. That even if you think about using another person for your own needs, you have violated God's will.

On the subject of gouging out eyes and cutting off hands, Jesus was not teaching self-mutilation. Rather, we wanted people understand that sin is life threatening and to not deal with it is dangerous to the human soul. Going to the root of his teaching, if you love others, and think of their needs before your own, you will be acting in a way that God intended for us in our

relationships with others, particularly in the close and intimate relationship of married partners.

THE THIRD LOVE LESSON - Love Is Faithful

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.

This is a difficult one because it is personally painful for so many people today. It was only after 1963 that remarriage after divorce was possible in the Anglican Church of Canada. Couples had to make an application to a Bishop's Matrimonial Commission who then made recommendations to the Bishop, whose decision was final. Currently, it is in the hands of local clergy to make decisions about remarriage after divorce. Civil Divorce is easy to get nowadays, and is often the first option when a spouse is unfaithful. But Jesus called everyone to be faithful in this regard, even those who are hurt. Jesus is a perfect example of someone who loves us even when we hurt Him, and we should strive to follow His example. We must never forget how many times our unfaithfulness has been forgiven.

On another level, Jesus called all people not just to push their spouses aside and "trade them in for a newer model." However, by including an exception clause, Jesus had in principle indicated that if there is one exception, there can be others as well. It was a recognition that there are certain terribly painful situations in life where the rules should not apply. The goal is love is faithful, realizing it might be very tough sometimes to be faithful, but that's the goal toward which we should always give our best efforts.

THE FOURTH LOVE LESSON - Love Is Unconditionally Truthful

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.

The law (Leviticus 19:12, Numbers 30:2) had said to keep oaths made to God and others. But Jesus preached that all our words should be truthful.

If we are to live in love with God and others, we must always be truthful, not just when under oath. Be truthful to your boss, your spouse, your neighbors, the Canada Revenue Agency but above all be truthful to yourself.

Achieving Life At Its Best

These probably aren't exactly what you had in mind when you thought of love lessons before Valentine's Day. However, Jesus is always calling us to the fullest joy and deepest meaning of life. And according to this passage, if you want life at its best, these four qualities need to define your relationship with God and others: love shows no hostility, love is not predatory, love is faithful, and love is unconditionally truthful.

A young boy in a Mel Lazarus comic strip told Miss Peach that what frightened him most in life is the realization that "my future is in the hands of a hopelessly incompetent fool ... namely me!"

The only cure for that fear is faith. Faith, not in one's self, but faith in God and the loving relationships to which God calls and empowers us.

Would you deepen your love for God today?

Would you like to find more joy in all your relationships with others, but particularly for those you call loved ones?

Would you like this Valentine's Day to be different than those of the past?

To those you love, send some word or action that demonstrates one or more of these love lessons. Learn from a new richness in all your relationships from Jesus' love lessons.

Prayer

Most Gracious Heavenly Father, you gave Saint Valentine the courage to witness to the gospel of Christ, even to the point of giving his life for it. Help us to endure all suffering for love of you, and to seek you with all our hearts; for you alone are the source of life and love. Grant that we may have the courage and love to be strong witnesses of your truth to our friends and family and to the whole world. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.