

February 16, 2020 – Matthew 5:21-37

We do some pretty silly things for Valentine's Day. At least, I did. Back in my college days, I was the master of finding obscure, personalized gifts that I was sure would hit the mark. I had it down to a science.

One girl liked lavender and was allergic to many metals. So I found her the only pair of hypoallergenic lavender earrings in northwest Ohio. One girl had a strange thing for black roses, which don't actually exist in nature. So I found a glass artist who would make her a glass black rose.

With Stefani, I nearly botched our first Valentine's Day altogether because it fell right in the middle of finals week at the seminary. But I think I came through in the end with roses, a coloring book, and a Winnie the Pooh Valentine's Day card. And if you know Stef like I do, you know that went over pretty well.

And yet, for all that I was so good at Valentine's Day back in my dating days, I can't say I've tried nearly as hard these past few years. Sure, you can chalk it up to marriage and familiarity and probably a bit of laziness. But I'd like to think that our marriage is healthier than that.

Which leads me to the conclusion that maybe the outward trappings aren't quite as important anymore. They should still be there, don't get me wrong. But forced expressions of love aren't nearly as valuable to a marriage as honest expressions of love. Love that comes from the heart. And that can't necessarily be summoned up all at once on a specific day. It's expressed throughout the year. It's part of our relationship.

Jesus isn't talking about Valentine's Day or marriage in our Gospel lesson today. But he is very much talking about expressing love from the heart. He actually begins this section with the last verse of our Gospel lesson from last week. A transition verse of sorts between the two passages that reads: *"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

Why exactly has he brought up the scribes and Pharisees here? Well, because this passage we read today is very much a contrast between how they interpreted the law and how He interprets the law. If you want to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees – if you want to exceed the righteousness of those who were considered the most righteous people on earth – you first need to know what they say. And then you need to know what God says.

And so Jesus starts with the 5th commandment. You shall not murder. Now, the Pharisees took this very literally and very strictly. And they had very conveniently separated murder from God's other admonitions to love your neighbor. To show humility and compassion for your fellow man.

And they never would have dreamed of connecting to the fifth commandment to something like calling a person a fool. Calling someone worthless or showing them contempt.

No, if you've insulted someone – even criminally insulted them with slander or threats to their life – don't worry about it. Bring a hefty offering to the Temple and a hefty bribe to the judge. Doesn't matter whether it's God or man, there's nothing money can't buy. Because, after all, it's not like you killed them.

But that's just it: it is like you've killed them. You've killed them in your heart. And that's where God resides. That's His true Temple. The Temple of the Holy Spirit. And the things you hold in your heart are exactly what God is watching. He is watching the contempt and the scorn and the bitterness and the hatred. He's watching it all play out in front of Him.

And then you try to make it all right with an offering at the Temple or a court settlement with a human judge? No. Don't you dare try to settle up with a human judge until you've settled up with your heavenly judge. Don't you dare try to pretend like everything is OK when there is still a broken relationship with God and man that you refuse to mend.

On and on Jesus goes. The sixth commandment. You shall not commit adultery. He's in your heart. He knows what's inside you. Even the times you least want him there.

And if you think you can make all this lust and desire for another person all right by just getting a divorce, you gotta another thing coming. Because in God's eyes, divorce without a darn good reason is little more than a license for serial polygamy. It's as much adultery as if you were still married to your first spouse.

It's the same with the eighth commandment. The Pharisees tried to make all sorts of rules about when you could swear and when you couldn't. What you could swear about and on who's name you could swear.

But Jesus says to them, "Don't swear." Because honestly you're not the one in control here. You don't have the authority or the power to enforce that oath. Which means that when you swear you're telling God how to do His job. And He doesn't like that very much. And he certainly doesn't like seeing inside your heart the kind of pride and arrogance that it takes to presume that you know how to dish out His wrath.

The Law isn't simply about what we say or do. Most of all, it's about expressions of the heart. And what Jesus tells us in this lesson is absolutely true. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. But it's not our eyes that cause us to sin. It's not our hands that cause us to sin. It's our heart that causes us to sin.

It's our heart that needs to be cut out. And that's what the Old Testament said all along. We hear it in Psalm 51: *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."* We hear it in Hosea 10: *"Their heart is false; now they must bear their guilt."* We hear it in Ezekiel 36: *"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."* Over and over again. It's the heart that's the problem.

It's just like Valentines Day, really. Valentines Day is a day about love. But love isn't just about what you do or what you say. It's about what's in your heart. And then our words and actions flow from that love.

God's Law is about our love. But it's not just about what we do or what we say. For God's Law demands that we love the Lord our God with all our heart. That we love our neighbors as ourselves. That we have a heart that obeys God's Law perfectly.

It's the heart that's the problem. And it's the heart that God must cut out. That's the nature of salvation. God wrenching from inside us that dead, hardened heart. And giving us a new one. As Ezekiel says, a heart of living flesh to replace that heart of stone. A heart of God's Spirit to replace that heart of human sinfulness.

A heart that pumps not the blood of human hatred and human lust and human pride. But the blood of Jesus Christ. Poured out by a crowd who cried "You fool!" and showed utter contempt for the Lord of glory. Poured by a people who would rather have their certificates of divorce than be the bride of Christ. Poured by men who dared to claim the authority of God's wrath and then killed the Son of God himself.

Poured out for us. That we might drink of it today. Drink and find new blood pumping in our veins. Eat and find new flesh growing in our hearts. Kneel and find the mercy of one who endured all the sinful ways we try to twist his law. So that we may rise with the forgiveness of the greatest expression of love the world has ever known.

God doesn't just try to fix a dead heart. He replaces it. He makes it new again. He gives us the heart of his Son. Who loved us so much that he would lay down his life for us. Who loved us so much that even while we were breaking commandment after commandment, he looked down with forgiveness.

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us. That's the heart we need. And that's the heart that we receive. Amen.