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Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

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Deut. 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; I Cor. 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

Whenever I've taught the 10 commandments to confirmation students using Martin Luther's explanations of the commandments, "What does this mean...we are to fear and love God so that, etc. etc. etc.," I always ask them what the easiest commandment to keep is. Usually they answer the 5th commandment. Anyone remember the 5th commandment – you shall not murder – which, of course, makes me very glad that they don't think that they'll be murdering anyone anytime soon. However, when we read Luther's explanation to the commandment they're not so sure it's that easy. Luther answers "what does this mean" with the words "we are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs." That's when I see the blood drain from their faces and they say, "yeah, never mind."

I'm guessing that's the same reaction the disciples had when Jesus started teaching them in Matthew 5 about the law. Jesus starts by saying "You have heard it said "You shall not murder, and whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." I can imagine the 12 nodding their heads, thinking yep, check, got it, don't murder. But then Jesus goes on: 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 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. And that's when I picture the blood draining from the disciples' faces, as they think about all the times in the past week they were angry with someone, insulted someone else, and called another a fool.

(I heard one commentator say this week that he can't even drive to the grocery store in traffic without saying "you fool" at least 5 times.)

And not only that, then Jesus tells the disciples that *while you're on your way to court* come to terms with your accuser or you'll be thrown into prison and you'll never get out until you've paid the last penny.

And not only that, then Jesus tells them that if you look at a woman with lust you have already committed adultery in your heart so you should tear out your eye and cut off your hand so that you your whole body doesn't go to hell.

And not only that, then Jesus tells them that if anyone divorces his wife except on the ground of unchastity causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

I know many people prefer the New Testament over the Old Testament because they think that God is all about rules in the Old Testament, but here it sounds like Jesus taking the laws of the Old Testament and putting them on steroids.

Why in the world would Jesus say these things? Why would our loving, compassionate, forgiving Lord make it sound so hard to live a life of faith?

When Jesus was a little boy, perhaps the age of the children who were just up here, I'm guessing his parents likely took him regularly to the synagogue in Nazareth where he would hear the Torah read, including what we heard this morning from Deuteronomy 30: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live." Choose life, and keep choosing life—life for you, life for your neighbor, life for the world.

That command that Jesus heard when he was young echoed in his head, in his heart, in his spirit from the time he was a boy to the moment he sat down on that mountain to tell his disciples in this same chapter of Matthew that they were blessed, that they were salt, that they were light. And after Jesus tells them who they are, Jesus tells them what a faith looks like that is blessed, that is salt, that is light. It's a faith that keeps choosing life, so that you and your descendants can live.

You see, Jesus isn't some strict disciplinarian in this text, Jesus isn't trying to get you for all the things you keep doing wrong. What Jesus was helping his disciples do—what Jesus is helping us do—is to choose life over anything else. Jesus is trying to give us a skeleton of life over which to hang grace.

Think about it—these laws that Jesus is highlighting when he says, "you have heard it said...but I say to you..."—all these laws are about caring for others

and building relationships—the things that Jesus knows bring about life. You choose life when you stop judging, you choose life when you forgive, you choose life when you settle grudges with people, you choose life when you treat others with respect, you choose life when you trust others and keep your vows.

In these laws, Jesus is even protecting those who were most vulnerable in his society, especially women, who were and often are still objectified and blamed for causing lust. As well, at that time a woman could be divorced even for ruining her husband's meal. In these laws prohibiting looking at a woman with lust and forbidding divorce Jesus is protecting and preserving life for women—Jesus is advocating for justice and equity because choosing life means living in a society where justice and equity abounds.

My dear friends in Christ, the law will not save you. The law will not love you back. But the law is the structure, the skeleton, God gives us to help us choose life, for ourselves and our neighbor.

When I am faced with a difficult decision or ethical dilemma, what I often ask myself is “what is most life-giving, for me and for others?” It's clear that those things that are life-giving for me and for my neighbor are the things to which Jesus is calling me.

But I should also say that what is life-giving for one person might not be the same for another. In conversations I have had with people who are contemplating divorce I've asked the question, what is most life-giving for you, for your partner, and for your children? Sometimes, choosing life so that you and your descendants may live might mean getting divorced. Remember, the law is always about choosing life. That's why Jesus was resurrected—to give you life, so that you and your descendants shall live.

So I'll leave you with this question to ponder this week: Where are you not choosing life? What is not life-giving, for you or for others right now? Go back to these words of Jesus, welcome the law that gives you the skeleton on which to hang your faith, trust that when you choose life, you are choosing what Jesus wants for you.

And my dear friends in Christ, remember that Jesus always—*always*—loves and chooses you. Amen.