

## **Lessons Along the Way: What's Hard Between Us**

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 5:21-37  
on February 12, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

Perhaps it's the coincidence that this year finds Valentine's Day just a couple of days past the Super Bowl, but I find that I have hearts on my mind and, well, my heart these days. By now, I'm sure we've all heard the story (if not seen the game) where Buffalo Bills' football player, Damar Hamlin, took a sharp blow on the field from the opposing player who tackled him, so sharp that it stopped his heart if but for a moment. And by now, perhaps you've purchased your valentine's candy – maybe the heart-shaped chocolate or candy hearts – and are ready for the swell of romance that Hallmark, ahem **Valentine's**, will provide.

As I think about the heart, I don't just think of football and fantasy, but rather I think of the pumping organ that keeps us alive, the center of our emotional lives, what's most central, what's at the essence, what's alive and animating and pulsing and living so that we too might live?

### II.

Last week, we began our deep-dive into Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, shared right at the heart of the Gospel of Matthew, that began with blessing. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are the mourning. You are salt and light of the earth!" Jesus tells his disciples. And just at the end of last week's passage of scripture was a word that is both a warning and a signal: "don't think that I've come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill." Let's remember: when Jesus is talking about "the law," he's speaking of the Torah, those first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures attributed to Moses. And when he speaks of

“the prophets,” he’s talking about much of the remainder of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus’ disciples were faithful Jews, and he never threatened that commitment.

In a moment, we’ll hear Jesus employ a rhetorical pattern that says, “you have heard it say..., but I say to you...,” where he references some pieces of the Ten Commandments and other laws around them, like “you shall not murder,” and “you shall not commit adultery,” So let’s be clear here: Jesus is not suggesting, “the law and the prophets have said this, but I now supersede that law and tell you otherwise. No need for those pesky scriptures anymore.” He’s neither contradicting the law, nor abandoning the law. Not at all. Rather, “fulfilling the law and the prophets” means he’s extending them, or intensifying them, or furthering them, “drawing out their full implications,” as scholar Amy-Jill Levine says or “surpassing their legalities.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, what Jesus is doing here is shining a light on the Pharisees and other religious legalists who keep the letter of the law, but violate the spirit of the law. Because what matters most to Jesus is not a new moral code, but rather a new freedom in the relationships between and among God and God’s people.<sup>2</sup> Here, Jesus goes right to the heart of it all.

So let’s unpack them.

First — **anger**. You know not to commit murder, Jesus begins, but when you hold a grudge and diminish others in your mind, your speech, or your actions because you’re angry with them, when you view another with contempt or total disregard, the same brokenness in relationship that can lead to *murder* is the brokenness that needs reconciling and restoring in the face of *anger*.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner’s Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven*, p24.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Moore, ed. *Following the Call: Living the Sermon on the Mount Together*, p83.

Next — **jealousy and lust**. You know not to commit adultery, Jesus names, but when you continue looking and lusting over someone else with the intent to make them yours, and thus diminishing your real partnership by brooding on a fantasy one, the same relational injury that can lead to *adultery* is the injury that demands the emotional equivalent of radical surgery – like eyes torn out and hands cut off – to be reconciled and restored.

Third — **divorce**. You know that there are provisions around divorce that reinforce the patriarchy, Jesus says, and makes even starker the power difference between a man and a woman by allowing a man absolute power to rid himself of his wife on a whim. But I tell you that not even when a marriage fails are you to devalue and demean your partner, or abandon them, or distort the relationship for your own gain.

Finally — **oaths**. You know that your ultimate oath should be sworn to God and God alone, Jesus reminds, but when you confuse your priority, and place your first loyalty to spouse or family or country, your language has been compromised and must be refocused and simplified for reconciliation and restoration. Or even when you try to act in God's name and assign all sorts of meaning to the action of God in the world, you are, knowingly or not, trying to control God. So don't do that!

In each instance – anger, adultery, divorce, and oaths – we hear the heart of Jesus' thoughts on relationships and how we deepen into the heart of God.

### III.

Think with me of the image of the heart and its arteries. The human heart, which beats slightly more than once every second, is at the essence and the source of life. Indeed “it is the most single-minded thing within you,”

as Bill Bryson once said, pumping more than 70 gallons of blood per hour all throughout your body.<sup>3</sup> Its job is to attend to those connections, to keep things clear and moving and unimpeded.

If we're to think of the Way of Jesus as the way of the heart – at the essence, the center, the pulsing core of all of life – then I'd like us to think about these bondages he names, these things that keep us from living wholeheartedly – anger, adultery, divorce, misguided oaths, and to which we'll add next week, violence and limits on our love – I imagine these instances akin to a clogged artery, the things that interfere with the flow of love that God wants for our lives.

We know what that feels like, don't we?

We know the feeling of anger that clogs and crowds our relationships, where small resentments build over time like plaque, and contempt, gone unchecked, dehumanizes and hardens us against each other. Augustine understood this when he said “for anger habitually cherished against anyone becomes hatred.”<sup>4</sup> And I love Frederick Buechner's description of anger:

“Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”<sup>5</sup>

Can't be good for the heart, that feast.

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Bryson, *The Body: A Guide for Occupants*, p112-113.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine of Hippo, as quoted in *Following the Call: Living the Sermon on the Mount Together*, p97.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABCs of Faith*, p18.

We know the feeling of infidelity, when one we love and trust has breached the very marrow of our relationship. We also know the feeling of lust, about a distorted coveting of what another has and a disregard for the covenant there. About this, scholar Amy-Jill Levine remarked, “Lust is thus a form of greed: the desire to possess what belongs to someone else.”<sup>6</sup> Or again from Buechner, “lust is the craving for salt of a person who is dying of thirst.”<sup>7</sup> Can’t be good for the heart, that craving.

Even if we’re not all married, many of us know the feeling of a deeply traumatic breakdown in relationships, on one side, struggling with the urge to abandon, to walk away and leave the pain behind; or on the other side, feeling the bitter sting of rejection and forsakenness when one we loved has left. Many of us know what a chilly marriage feels like, where love and gentleness and compassion have been exchanged for family-logistics- management and keeping-the-house-up administration and you-stay-in-your-lane -and-I’ll-stay-in-mine operation. Johann Christoph Arnold wonders, “How many of us have been cold-hearted or loveless to our spouses at one time or another? How many thousands of couples, rather than loving each other, merely coexist? True faithfulness is not simply the absence of adultery. It must be a commitment of heart and soul.”<sup>8</sup> And some of us know the incredible pain of divorce, what it feels like to realize the devastating reality that this relationship has been so distorted and destructive that it is no longer tenable or possible. Can’t be good for the heart, that tragedy.

We know the feeling of casual oath-keeping and misguided vows, when quick and easy promises to another (“we should get together!” or “yes, I’ll do

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<sup>6</sup> Levine, p33.

<sup>7</sup> Buechner, p236.

<sup>8</sup> Johann Christoph Arnold, as quoted in *Following the Call: Living the Sermon on the Mount Together*, p116.

that for you!,” or “everything happens for a reason” or “God won’t give you anything you can’t handle!”), serve more like a band-aid on a broken bone, rather than the verbal sutures that lead to healing. We know those feelings when interactions between each other or with God become transactional, bonds become breaches, vows go unmet or unnoticed, and truth-telling is nowhere to be found out of fear or flattened integrity. Can’t be good for the heart, these banalities.

We know what these things feel like, because we feel them **here** – in our hearts – and how they make life hard and hardened between us: how they clog and clot and block the freedom that the flow of Love brings to our lives. We know what they feel like to us on both sides of that flow, and how, as giver or receiver, we cut off the circulation of grace without even realizing it. In her signature wry way, Anne Lamott asks, “Why couldn't Jesus command us to obsess over everything, to try to control and manipulate people, to try not to breathe at all, or to pay attention, stomp away to brood when people annoy us, and then eat a big bag of Hershey's Kisses in bed?”<sup>9</sup>

Yet it’s to all of us that Jesus directs this Sermon on the Mount’s call for obedience in motive as well as in deed.<sup>10</sup> To live wholeheartedly in relationships, bringing the fullness of my beloved self and receiving the fullness of another’s beloved self. To love as Jesus called us to love: with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, with God and neighbor, grounded in belovedness. To turn contempt into forgiveness, lust into contentment, broken relationships into reconciliation and repair, and false oaths into

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<sup>9</sup> Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, p224.

<sup>10</sup> Jen Wilkin, as quoted in *Following the Call: Living the Sermon on the Mount Together*, p86.

honesty. To trust in the grace and the buoyancy of God.<sup>11</sup> To keep what's at the heart, at the heart.

#### IV.

“I don't know how long it had been since these two neighbors had talked to each other,” begins the story told by Asheville-based singer-songwriter David Wilcox. He goes on to tell about these two neighbors, property divided by a creek, who somewhere along the way had a falling out about a stray cat. “Just the dumbest reason,” Wilcox said. Both men were taking care of this stray cat and after a while, one of the neighbors took the cat into his house. Well the other neighbor thought that it was his cat, and so whenever the two talked to each other, they'd quickly begin yelling and wound up storming off until after a while, they just quit talking to each other at all.

One day a traveling carpenter came up to one of them out in the yard and asked if there might be any work he could do for 'em. And the man said, “Yeah, I've got something for you to do. You see that house over there? Well that's my neighbor; his property starts down there at that creek. So I want you to take this here pile of lumber and build me a fence, all along the water so I don't even have to look at him. Could you do that for me?” A little surprised, the carpenter says, “Yeah, I could do that but I'll need some more wood.

Why don't you let me get started with what you have here, and you go on into town to get some more wood so I can finish the job?” So the man goes off to buy more wood, and as he's bouncing back down the rutted

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<sup>11</sup> Loved this phrase from Marcus Borg in *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 31.

dirt road, new lumber clacking around in the back of his truck, he looks out over that field to see where his new fence oughtta be. Only when he looks out over his property line, he sees that the carpenter has built not a fence, but a bridge, with his wood. And before he can get down there, he sees his neighbor come out of his house and walk across that bridge, built with his wood, onto his land. Well that neighbor walks right up to him with his hand outstretched with a big ole' stupid smile on his face and says, "You're a brave man. I thought you'd never want to hear the sound of my voice again. I feel like such a fool. Can you forgive me?"

And then the man finds himself taking his outstretched hand and hears himself saying, "Aww heck, I knew that was your cat anyways." Then he sees the carpenter walking away and calls out, "Hey, I've got some more work for you if you need it." But the carpenter turns and says, "No, you'll be fine, I'm needed elsewhere."<sup>12</sup>

Anger and adultery and divorce and misguided oaths are hard; they're the kind of hard that hardens. Forgiveness and grace and reconciliation and repair and honesty are hard, but they're the kind of hard that loosens. That loosens the tightness in our chest, that loosens the clogs and the clots in our flow of Love, that loosens the things that keep us from one another.

I'm reminded of that song from the Judds – it's a little cheesy, but I bet you're thinking of it too:

*Love can build a bridge  
Between your heart and mine  
Love can build a bridge  
Don't you think it's time? Don't you think it's time?*

Amen!

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<sup>12</sup> David Wilcox, "The Carpenter Story," from the *East Asheville Hardware* live album, as introduced to me and retold by my dear friend, Scott Dickison. Original can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwJur79mJDk>.