

6 Epiphany February 12, 2023  
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**But Jesus Says**  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

There are many ways to make decisions. How do you make yours? Some people need to gather information, make a list of pros and cons, ask for advice, consider potential outcomes, even factor in how others might be impacted by or judge the decision. Some people rely on intuition. Others rely on previous experience. There are those who prefer spontaneity. A few consider how decisions may or may not align with or support their core values, religious, spiritual, or political beliefs.

The ability to make decisions is a common theme in all our readings this morning. Each reading highlights how decision making can be a conduit for the love to God can shine through our words and our actions. In Sirach the author reminds us God does not command anyone to do harm, that we can choose to follow God's ways and we can choose not to. So if we cause harm, it is most likely our decision, not God's. Paul goes a little deeper in his letter to the new church in Corinth by bringing up the role maturity plays in decision making. Maturity has nothing to do with age in this letter, it has to do with how a person behaves and how they treat others. When factions formed over which leader they preferred, Paul reminded them God is the provider of growth, and maturity means looking for God's glory in a community, not their own.

The Gospel reading for today is a continuation of Jesus' long sermon called the Sermon on the Mount and goes even deeper into how followers of Jesus who were listening to him then and those of us living today are to make decisions. Jesus takes the law and reveals how it can be interpreted to living a whole, full life that gives glory to God. The author of Matthew's Gospel reminds us that we have heard it said many times that humans are essentially bad and cannot help doing harmful, selfish acts which is why we need the law to keep us from doing the wrong thing. But the Gospel goes on to say Jesus reminds us we are not made for ourselves alone, we are made for each other and for God because we are lovingly made in God's image which means humanity is not bad, we were proclaimed by God to be good.

This does not mean everything we choose is good. It means we have the potential and the possibility to live into God's love that is already part of us, if we decide to. In today's Gospel, Jesus helps us figure out how to do this, to make every decision in the light of God's Love.

To do this, the author of Matthew's Gospel sets up a specific speech pattern for Jesus who begins with "you have heard it said," and then counters with, "but I say to you..." For example, the Gospel begins with Jesus saying, "You have heard it said you

shall not murder.... but I say to you if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable.” Now, there is a big difference between feeling anger and committing an act of murder.

Anger is inevitable, we are all going to get angry over various things. Jesus is not saying anger itself is wrong or bad, it is part of being human, which means it can have the potential for doing good, it can even be an opportunity for love to grow and relationships to grow stronger. When something or someone makes you angry, there is an opportunity to explore why, to step back and wonder what about a situation or person is making you angry. Often times anger can be a surface emotion for a deeper one like grief or fear.

Not long after my husband and I were married, we were having an argument and in the middle of the argument my husband asked why we were fighting. I said the situation we were facing made me afraid. Then he said he was afraid too and asked me, “Can’t we just be afraid together?” That was an incredibly mature realization and is probably why in that moment I grew more in love with my husband. It helped make our relationship stronger.

What Jesus was saying in today’s Gospel is anger does not have control our decisions and actions, it can enlighten them, and be a means of love in action, revealing God with us. In this way, the love of God is not only *not* hostile or violent, it prevents and overcomes hostility and violence with trust, vulnerability, and care.

Likewise, when Jesus mentioned what we have heard about lust and divorce what he said can be summed up that the love of God is not predatory; it recognizes all people are made in the image of God and are not on this earth to be exploited. Marriage is not a business transaction, it is a relationship between two people who need compassion, trust, and forgiveness to create a life together. It is also true there are so many people who disagree with this there are industries that make obscene amounts of money exploiting people, but as followers of Jesus we are called to listen to another way, his way, and treat all people with respect.

Respect for ourselves and others is at the heart of Jesus’ final point about vows. It is about being honest because the Love of God is truthful. These days we hear that opinions carry the same weight as the truth, but opinions can change, especially as we mature, and how we share our opinions matter because they can cause harm. So, we have to be careful about how we distinguish the difference between an opinion and the truth.

For example, there are people of the opinion that divorce is bad, and it can be. That does not mean it is the right or wrong thing in every circumstance. It is also harmful to force someone to stay in an abusive marriage, or in a relationship that has ended. Relationships are like living things, they can die. And while divorce is not always ideal, like someone changing and becoming respectful and loving instead of abusive, it is better than forcing someone to repeatedly receive abuse. The discernment is in remembering what Jesus says about compassion, being honest, and letting the love of God shine through whatever the circumstance is.

Without the compassion of God's love, emotions like fear, lust, hate and anger can eat a person alive, until a person forgets they are made to be in relationship with God and others. When that happens, a person can create for themselves what the Gospel writer called hell, or Gehenna, which was an actual place. It was where the people of ancient Jerusalem dumped and burned their garbage. It was a smelly, hot, smoldering mess that Jesus warned is what any life can become when we repeatedly choose hate and by so doing decide to separate ourselves from God and each other.

That is why Jesus not only says there is another way, he lived that way, even took on the anger and fear and hate of the world that nailed him to a cross for proving the way of God's love does work. God's Love works so well, even death was not able to stop Jesus from bringing God's love to fruition through the resurrection.

I know it is not always easy to live the way Jesus says in today's Gospel. But we can try because it is empowering to realize our decisions can give God glory and shine the love of God into the world. It is true that sometimes we might fail or fall, but forgiveness is part of the resurrection life Jesus brings, and forgiveness is one of many opportunities to grow closer to God and each other. This growth is the maturity mentioned by both Paul and the author of Sirach in their letters. The same maturity they encourage us all to consider when we make our decisions about what we do and say, today, tomorrow, all week, all month, all year, all our lives. Perhaps one way we can practice this in our lives today is whenever we have decisions to make to remember the same pattern set up in today's Gospel where we have heard it said.... but Jesus says whatever we do to love God and each other with compassion, forgiveness, mercy, trust and truth. By doing so, we bring glory to God.