

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Sirach 15:15-20, Psalm 119:1-8, Matthew 5:21-37
David Teschner
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Lao-Tzu was a Chinese philosopher who lived in the 6th century BC and is thought to have started Taoism. One of his more recognized quotes might be said to summarize Jesus' teaching in our gospel lesson this morning.

Watch your thoughts, for they become words.

Watch your words, for they become actions.

Watch your actions, for they become habits.

Watch your habits, for they become character.

Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.

Jesus is focusing on the all-important subjects of anger, alienation, sex and integrity this morning. He is quoting commandments familiar to Jews and to us from the top 10 list. He ratchets up these commandments for his followers so that our righteousness will exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, and so that we can be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect.

A former member of the church who is now deceased and attended rarely surprised us when she came to our early Thursday morning Bible study. We spent some time talking about sin. As the class was ending, she finally said, "I don't understand what all this talk is about for I honestly don't think I have ever sinned." We were all so stunned by her statement, we couldn't respond, so we prayed and went home.

Having thought a lot about her response, I think since she had never murdered, stolen or committed adultery, she thought she was sinless. Maybe I should have referred her to Matthew 5, but she never returned to Bible study or church until her burial. God bless her.

Who of us can honestly say we have never been angry? There is a distinction between justifiable anger and petty anger or anger without good cause. We are right to be angry when we see an injustice being committed. Anger over an over-cooked hamburger is inexcusable. Of course, we cannot always anticipate or control our initial emotions or feelings. Sometimes they really do take us by surprise. They just happen.

The question then becomes what do we do next? Excessive and frequent anger is a serious problem and definitely something we should get professional help for. Most of

us don't need an anger management class. We do need anger management and anger awareness, however. Letting hot anger smolder is a grave danger as Jesus points out. It may lead to greater harm to others. Next, we may call someone a fool, which is to express contempt and devalue one or more of God's creations and beloved children. Anger like other natural impulses most often needs to be quickly let go of with a prayer for God's forgiveness. (I also find it helpful to ask God's blessing on the person that caused my anger to flare up, remembering Jesus' directive to love even my enemies.)

Jesus goes so far as to say that being in right relationship with our fellow human beings is more important than worship. Our worship is invalid or unacceptable to God if we haven't first, before we approach the altar, made an attempt to be reconciled with our brothers and sisters. Even if they are the offending party, Jesus instructs us to reach across the divide – not to wait for them to come to us.

Jesus is asking us to practice exceptionally high ethical standards. G. K. Chesterton wrote that, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." In God's kingdom, all are reconciled; none is alienated or God forsaken. Christ died to break down all the dividing walls.

Anger, alienation and now sex. "...everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery in his heart." Anger can serve a good purpose when it is channeled into positive change toward the elimination of injustice. Sexual desire among men and woman can have a positive outcome when it brings couples into lasting fidelity and steadfast love for one another. Sexual desire is destructive when it occurs outside a faithful union or finds expression in exploitative relationships. Writer and theologian Frederick Buechner, said, "Sex is like nitroglycerin, it can be used to heal hearts or blow up bridges." Again, much like anger, lust or sexual desire will occur spontaneously, but just as quickly, it needs to be let go of. The danger comes when misdirected desire is nursed with imaginative musings or visuals aids.

One of the best definitions of sin I've come across is "the misuse of God's powers given to us for doing good."

Anger, let it go. Sexual desire, let it go, except for your mate. Alienation, go and fix it.

Jesus doesn't mean for us to literally pluck out our eyes or cut off our hands, but he does mean for us to take sin very seriously and turn away from it.

I picked the passage from Sirach, otherwise known as Ecclesiasticus, because the author is very direct. He doesn't mince words. The choices are ours. Will our choices cause us to

burn with destructive fire or refresh us with living water? Will our choices result in abundant life or suffocating death? And, "God has not given anyone permission to sin."

Yes, we can say, but God is forgiving, right? Absolutely, much more so than we deserve, but that doesn't mean we can do whatever we please, or whatever feels good because God is merciful. That's called presuming on God's mercy or taking advantage of God's goodness without doing our part to love God and neighbor with all our heart, strength and mind. God knows what we're doing. Nothing escapes his gaze. No secrets are hid. God's standards are high for our own sakes, not to take the fun out of life, and we have God's help always.

We will fail over and over to live up to those high standards, but that is no reason to stop trying.

As for the taking of oaths, Jesus wants his followers to have integrity and uprightness in all matters. Make your Yes mean yes and your No mean no, just as our parents taught us. There really is no need for complicated oaths like swearing on the Bible or on your mother's grave if you are simply forthright, which is always the best policy.

Christianity is both demanding and rewarding. As in most things, we'll get as much out of it as we put into it. This morning Jesus is asking us to consider a deeper obedience, to consider the root causes of our actions, to internalize the commandments so we may please God in all our thoughts, words and deeds.

It's been said that whereas the great generation lived in a culture that was obligation-based, we now live in a culture that is choice-based. Choices abound, so choose wisely. Always think first, "What effect will this choice have on me, on my family, on my church, on my community, on the world, on my God and on my destiny?" AMEN