

“Heart to heart” a sermon based on Matthew 5:21-37 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 16 February 2020.

The Bible readings we normally use on Sundays are suggested by an international body. They selected for today a tough set of sayings. Indeed, if I was going to lead a seminar on why to dislike Jesus, the reading today would be my text. Harsh and condemnatory. I want to peel away the top layer, and see what is at their heart. Because what is at their heart can peel back our skin, and ask what is in our heart. Peeling back the skin of approaching these as if they are statements of Victorian morality. Peeling back the skin as if concepts used then, mean the same thing now. Peeling back the skin because the world of the Bible is and is not our world, and we need to take the difference seriously. For example in relation to marriage. 2000 years ago, marriage was very different. Marriages were arranged, not motivated by love as we understand it. Marriages were unequal - the husband was often twice the age of the wife, and the wife could be easily dismissed. So as we peel back the surface, what is at the heart of these sayings and what do they ask of our hearts? I am doing something I rarely do, go through a text, saying by saying.

Verses 21-22

It sounds like a condemnation of anger. But Jesus is not speaking about plain anger. Jesus himself got angry, at people, at things. We learn that from the gospels. Anger in itself is neutral and natural - like hunger or thirst. Jesus is speaking about holding anger against a person, about anger that abides. If we hold on to anger, it can be redirected against ourselves or blow up cruelly, as Jesus says. This is an important topic in an increasingly polarised society where people express outrage and react online and where every day there are hateful and vindictive statements. The question is whether we are letting anger rest in our heart, and what we do with that anger. Is it turned towards justice and life and peace, or tearing people down or creating enemies? Do we let anger reside in our heart, straining relationships?

vv. 23 to 26.

Jesus asks us to bring the right attitude to worship. It is a good thing to make an offering – worthy and right and life-giving – but let it prompt forgiveness and reconciliation. Eugene Peterson's paraphrase - "If you enter a place of worship and about to make an offering you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go this friend and make things right. Then work things out with God." Worship sensitises us to what we are doing with our relationships, and it offers a safe place for people to make peace. Worship gets beneath the surface, under our skin and if often breaks open our hearts – again and again. Which is why church can an awkward place, because people are aware they cannot separate their relationship with God from their relationship with each other. We are in a constant process of straining and rebuilding relationships, which is often the hardest, most deeply personal part of worshipping. Because it is about integrity and genuineness and authenticity. Church is not a pretend place and worship is not a pretend time. When we pass the peace, when we pray for others, when we confess, we are expressing this call of Jesus. What is in our heart? How does our offering reflect a desire for peace or an exercise of power?

vv. 27 – 30

Hyperbole. Exaggeration to make a point. These words are addressed to men in relationship with women. Do not look upon a woman in order to make a sexual response to her. Do not look upon a woman for the purpose of sexualising her. Do not look upon a woman in a way that objectifies her. Jesus is not asking us to repress sexual feelings. When they are healthy, they are as natural and neutral as anger is. But, men, how are you approaching your relationships with women? What is in your heart? Eugene Peterson – "Those leering looks you think nobody notices – they also corrupt." This was a time of pronounced patriarchy, when women had little voice or power or status. We now live in a time of pornography spreading through the internet. These words are as relevant as ever. Jesus is saying to men, take control of yourself. Take responsibility for how you express yourself sexually. It is one thing to explore sexuality; it is another to objectify or sexualise women – that is an abuse of power.

vv. 31 - 32

Before Greco-Roman times if a husband was unhappy with a wife, he took another wife - polygamy. In Greco-Roman times, polygamy ended and the only way to end a marriage was through divorce. But in a patriarchal society, a man could divorce a woman on the most spurious grounds – the quality of cooking, a menial task not completed. Arbitrary discarding, that brought shame on the woman and on the woman's family, often through no fault of hers. A divorced woman had three options – Return to her original family – not always possible, and brought shame; marry again – in a patriarchal and unequal society; or be an independent person, although this was by far the most risky step. So Jesus is raising the bar. The only ground for divorce became adultery. And Matthew has gathered these sayings for a community called to care for women who were divorced. Painful as it can be, divorce is sometimes necessary. Painful as it is, couples sometimes decide adultery will not lead to divorce. This is a not a law against divorce. The heart here is the overcoming of patriarchy, one of the most persisting of injustices. The heart here is building a community that protects the vulnerable. Overturning the destructiveness of unrestrained male power.

vv. 33 – 37

Let me read from Eugene Peterson ... Don't say anything you don't mean. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk saying ... "I'll pray for you", and never doing it, or saying "God be with you," and not meaning it. You don't make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. Just say "yes" or "no". Let your yes be yes and your no be no.

But there is something else running through these sayings. They sound harsh and condemnatory. They sound like those preachers who try to scare us into the kingdom of God. But that approach is a denial of the heart of love. Let's peel away that skin. These sayings highlight the consequences of what we do with anger and relationships including between men and women. And they raise the question of whether people get away with injustice and abuse and sustained anger and the discarding of vulnerable people. There is underlying these sayings a belief that there will there be a day of reckoning when things

are put right, when love will prevail and truth will be seen. They highlight that the arc of life bends towards justice and equity, to adapt a saying.

So Jesus is peeling away the skin, and raising questions for us. How does a community enable hearts to be healthy? What would a world look like if our hearts were Jesus hearts? Where anger didn't take hold of us. Where our worship incited reconciliation. Where we never objectified people. Where vulnerable people are supported. Where our yes meant yes and our no meant no. What is in our heart?

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