

WHEN JESUS GIVES EXECUTIVE ORDERS

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis on February 12, 2017

Epiphany 6A 2017

Matthew 5: 21-37

This is a tough Gospel reading. Jesus is the Rule-Giver and he doesn't mince words. In his equivalent of an executive order, Jesus is saying, "This is the way it *was*, but under my rule, in the Reign of God, the Kingdom of God, things are changing. The rules just got a whole lot tougher."

These words of Jesus make me cringe—especially for people who are divorced or married to someone who was divorced. I went through the directory and counted 49 people who have either been divorced or experienced divorce in their immediate family. It seems hard not to feel publicly called out by this Gospel reading.

Everybody knows if you're divorced. Our breaking of these other rules—like not being angry, not insulting, not lusting, not swearing by God's name, not settling disputes out of court—our breaking of these other rules is not as widely known. But I'm pretty sure if I asked for a show of hands for everyone who has ever been angry with someone, and let that anger shape their relationship, we'd have a church full of hands in the air.

So, the truth is we're all rule breakers of these new executive orders of the Kingdom of God. It kind of feels like a set-up for failure rather than a piece of good news—Maybe we should just dismiss it as a message from another time that just isn't that relevant.

Or maybe not. I actually think there is a lot of good news in these rules and some stuff that really does speak to us now—but we've got to do some work to get there.

One of the first things we have to do is look at the purpose of the law. I don't know why I never really registered this before this week, but the Jewish people of Jesus's time had two sets of laws: the law that was laid down by the Romans which mostly had to do with taxes and not rebelling against the state; and the laws of Judaism, which, for the Pharisees in particular, had to do with almost every aspect of everyday life.

Let's take a step back, to the most famous set of laws in Judaism, the Ten Commandments. From a faith perspective, these were a gift from God to God's people—and following them was what it meant to be in relationship with God. But it's also interesting to look at what these laws meant for the people from a sociological perspective. The Ten Commandments basically kept them together as a people.

We are a very individualistic society—we have individual rights and responsibilities that are guaranteed by the state. But in Biblical times, the most important unit was the extended family—which made the stakes higher. If you insulted or harmed or divorced someone, you did it to the whole extended family. So, what the Ten Commandments did, from a sociological perspective, was prevent feuding between extended families—and basically keep the Israelites from killing each other and destroying themselves as a people.

I think that it is super interesting to look at the Ten Commandments from a sociological perspective because it actually points to a great theological truth that is easily missed. When

God gives the law to the people of Israel, *it really is a gift*. It is literally a way of life for them because it keeps them from destroying themselves.

But the law is also given by God to strengthen community. That's the essential point of what Jesus is doing when he intensifies the Jewish laws that were already in place. He's not so much setting a new direction, as taking it to a new level.

And his reason for doing it is that the Kingdom of God is already starting—so it's time to move to the next level in terms of how we treat each other.

These laws are for the Christian community. They are rules governing relationships *within* the Christian community. The bottom line, the most fundamental change that Jesus makes is seeing everyone who is following him, everyone who is a part of the Jesus movement, as being in one extended family.

As many of us know, the pain that we inflict on each other within our families can be crueler than anything that comes from a stranger. Inside the family, the wounds can be deep and festering. Jesus sees through to the depths of our brokenness—our common brokenness.

We all have our experiences of relationships that are in pieces—maybe we are holding on to anger as a way to keep the distance—maybe we've moved past the anger to the place of not caring. I get that. Not caring anymore is certainly one of the most effective ways to move on. But, I think if there were another way—if some kind of reconciliation was possible that let us acknowledge both how much we cared *and* how hurt we were—and even how much *we* hurt someone else-- I think many of us would want the peace *that* would give.

Likewise, when Jesus talks about not lusting, what I hear him speaking to is the pain of being objectified, of not being seen as a whole person. I've *never* met a person who didn't want *that* kind of respect.

The discussion about divorce raises a lot of questions. Some Christian traditions have seen this as an absolute rule. In the Bible, the understanding of marriage and divorce changes over time. At the time of Jesus, Jewish law allowed for husbands to divorce their wives, something which caused a break in relationships between the two families, and often, left the woman extremely vulnerable. Jesus basically says: that was not God's intent.

For us today, one of the things to pay attention to is that Jesus re-interprets the tradition in a way that cares for the most vulnerable. Along with strengthening community, that is the essential value here.

The last part of Jesus's executive order is about oaths—basically letting everyone know that what you say is true by bringing God into it. I have a family member who has a very fluid relationship with the truth—and sometimes when her version of the story is questioned, she emphatically says, "I swear on the Holy Bible." She has made it clear that when she says that, she's telling the truth. I've made it equally clear that once you establish a pattern of lying, it's hard to get someone to believe you.

In Jesus's day, oaths were often a part of the marketplace. You might be buying some wheat and the scale shows a pound and, to you it looks like $\frac{3}{4}$ of a pound. When you question it, the salesperson says, "I swear to God, it's a pound." So, when Jesus says forget about oaths, he's saying, don't use God to justify your cheating or lying. Within the Christian community,

have so much integrity that there's no need to bring God into it. Tell the truth, and do it consistently, so that you have relationships where trust is strong.

These executive orders of Jesus reveal to us who God is and what God values: reconciliation, respect, care of the vulnerable and integrity. These are the ways of living that point to and make real now the Kingdom of God. They are given to us to strengthen community, and they do that by orienting us toward our neighbor. Most laws draw lines or set limits but these executive orders of Jesus push us out of ourselves and toward our neighbor. The focus is no longer protecting and preserving myself and my stuff but on building and strengthening bonds with other members of our community.

As I see it, what Jesus is doing in these executive orders is give some specifics to that great and basic commandment to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. He's saying *this* is what love of neighbor looks like: reconciliation, respect, care of the vulnerable and integrity. It's hard work and it is usually not warm and fuzzy—and we often fall short in doing it. But it's what it takes to strengthen a community.

All of this begs the question of “What is the community?” Is it the Christian community or even more specifically, is it *this* Christian community, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount? Or is the community bigger than that?

Just as Jesus reinterprets the tradition for his time, we can do that for our time. This a time in our country and world that cries out for people who see people as people rather than objects to be used or feared. For people who see others as their neighbors and who want to love them in concrete ways. We have just come up with a vision statement that orients us in this way. We are “a faith-rooted community with no walls: always learning, always serving.”

So, as we think about how these executive orders of Jesus apply in our lives beyond these walls, we're not looking to impose rules or laws that prohibit divorce or taking of oaths. I think what we're doing is taking ways of living that build and strengthen community out there—in our daily lives beyond this place, and in the ministry and actions we take together with people who are not participants in this church.

We're doing this not because we're less broken than anyone else—or more together. We're doing this because—to one degree or another-- we are in touch with the love of God that takes our brokenness and helps us reach out enough to see that another person is also broken. And in that turning toward the one who is in need—even if we cannot fix it—God is gluing the pieces together.

May God take our brokenness—our own need for reconciliation, our own need for respect, our own lack of integrity, our own vulnerability—and use it to put us together with others who are also in pieces—

And, may God give us peace. Amen.