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 Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
 Larkspur, California  
 February 6, 2011  
 Matthew 5: 21-48  
 "You have heard...but"

Thank you Ani for reading the gospel passages today. These are tough sayings by Jesus. In one church I served, the liturgist for the day said he couldn't read a biblical passage because he didn't agree with what was written. He asked me to read it which I did and fortunately I could follow it with a reasonable interpretation.

The same applies to the readings today. How are they words to live by in our day? My intention is not to soften what Jesus says but to try to understand them for our context.

The separate sections read by Ani are the lectionary readings for today and next week. Next week I will read the following week's text to make way for non-lectionary readings the last Sunday which will celebrate the gifts of women.

The gospel reading today is from the Sermon on the Mount and has a different pattern from the rest of the sermon – like the Beatitudes.

Jesus introduces each section with similar phrases: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times..." or, "You have heard that it was said," or, "It was also said," or, "Again, you have heard that it was said..."

Jesus looks back to the Torah which was written between 300 and 800 years before his coming. In each case he says you have heard that it was said *but* I say to you... Today, one is told to avoid the word "but" because it cancels out what was said before: "Your new car is fantastic but how come you chose red?" or, "That's a cool dress but the sleeves are too long."

But "but" is in the English language so it serves a purpose. Jesus uses the word intentionally. In a sense, he *wants* to cancel what went before. But then he says things that are difficult for us in our day.

For instance, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'<sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.<sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.<sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

<sup>31</sup>"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'

<sup>32</sup>But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity,

causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

For us, Jesus goes back further than the ancients of his day and thus his words are in ways foreign to us. Jesus wants us to do the same with his words. As followers of Jesus, we too can honestly say of his words, “You have heard...but.”

Commentators say that this section of Jesus’ sermon presents an ethic that does not contradict the Torah but exhorts Israel to live the Torah in a new way. Just as Jesus provided an alternative interpretation in his day he expects us to do the same in our day. It’s logical really. So let’s look a little more closely at the passage just quoted. The worst we can do with the passage is to take it literally. Even fundamentalist literalists still have all their eyes and hands.

Jesus is concerned about the sanctity of marriage and so are we but he seems to see “unchastity” as the only valid ground for divorce. Perhaps spousal abuse wasn’t a named issue in his day but it is in our day as is serious incompatibility, wrong choices made when one is too young or when one doesn’t take in the full picture of what marriage means when one gets married.

Jesus says stick with marriage no matter what except for unchastity. We would say: Try counseling first. There are always extenuating circumstances for divorce and the church recognizes this when it affirms the validity of first-time marriage, marriage after the death of a spouse and marriage after a divorce.

Christians enter marriage for “as long as you both shall live.” Divorce is not taken lightly but it happens to the best of us and when it does one is embraced and supported by the church.

Jesus speaks of “hell.” Hell is hurtful and dehumanizing behavior in this life and the next.

Another section: <sup>38</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ <sup>39</sup>But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; <sup>40</sup>and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; <sup>41</sup>and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. <sup>42</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

This reinterprets the law of retribution. While we don’t take Jesus’ words literally like if someone punches me on my right cheek I’m not sure I will point to my left cheek and invite another punch and yet I might walk an extra mile with one who forces me to go one mile with him or her.

Jesus’ primary intention is to break the cycle of violence which is action, reaction and counter-action where one person, ethnic group or country hits out, the other hits back and then the first hits again based on the reaction and so the cycle continues. Jesus says

don't hit back, swallow your pride, eat humble pie, take the high road and the conflict will dissipate.

Do we give to everyone who begs from us, and not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from us? I don't think so. The principle is to lean towards generosity but we cannot give to everyone, or perhaps we give in different ways. I tend to give to institutions that care for needy individuals but I have cash in hand for some persons when the situation arises. Gamblers Anonymous can provide counsel on the one who borrows. We don't give to anyone but we do give to some. It's a situation ethic.

In an earlier passage Jesus says: "Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No.'" God helps us discern. We do our best and do not worry about the rest.

One more: <sup>43</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup>But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup>For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup>Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

This is an excellent teaching but it's not easy to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Pick an enemy. Is it the Taliban? Love the Taliban. Is it your next door neighbor? Love your neighbor. Is it your boss? Love your boss. Is it your estranged mother or father? Love your mother and father. This doesn't mean that we condone their actions or that we do not seek justice. We work for restorative justice, not retributive justice. We address the enemy, stop the enemy in non-hateful and non-hurtful ways. I'm not sure I can be as perfect as God is perfect and yet God is love and when we love we are like God.

We pray for our persecutors. God knows they need it. This doesn't mean that we accept their persecution or that we don't try to stop what they are doing. At the end of this section Jesus expects us to embrace the world. We might be accused of being idealistic but that's okay. We embrace it anyway.

I never thought we could say "but" to Jesus. It is freeing to know that we can so long as we keep his intent and expand his thinking with the best thinking, insights and grace that God has given us today. There's much more to the readings today. The best each of us can do is to read and reread them, meditate on them, read commentaries and discuss them with others. It's an endless well. Enjoy the challenge. Amen.