

Deuteronomy 30:11-30

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹²It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' ¹³Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' ¹⁴No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Matthew 5:21-37.

[Jesus said:] "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 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. 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.

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

"Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is

the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."

In another week of news happening, fast and furious, the president sat for an interview with Bill O'Reilly of Fox News. Mr. O'Reilly asked the president about Russia, about Vladimir Putin and Mr. Trump's apparent admiration of him. It should have been an easy one. Putin's murdering journalists who criticize him, his assassinating political dissidents, his committing war crimes in Chechnya, Crimea, and the Ukraine: Mr. Putin should be an easy one to take strong issue with.

But, no—not for our new president. Mr. Putin is the one person whom Mr. Trump has *never* criticized.

Think about it, if you haven't already. Of all the many put-downs Trump has put out—Meryl Streep (overrated!), the cast of Hamilton (rude!), Nordstrom's department store (unfair!), voters in Iowa (stupid), the "intelligence community" (wrong!), the military (disaster), the previous administration (not smart), the union boss at the Carrier plant (terrible job), Senator McCain (loser), Mr. Kahn (viciously attacking), the press (liars, the most dishonest people), all of Washington's establishment (swamp)—none have been aimed at Vladimir Putin.

A friend from high school took note of this in an op-ed he wrote for the *Los Angeles Times*. Under the headline, "Hypocrisy isn't the problem. Nihilism is," Jacob Levy points out that crying hypocrisy is the name of the game facing every new administration. When the tables turn, when there's a revolution of power, the new underdogs are always eager to point out the hypocrisy of those newly in power. You who were once so against executive orders: what do you have to say about it now? You were who once so appalled at the use of the filibuster: what do you have to say about it now? You who took issue with the first family's vacation expenses: what do you have to say about it now? And speaking of money, what about deficit spending??

"With depressing regularity," Mr. Levy writes (or, can I just call him Jacob? His study carrel was right near mine.) "With depressing regularity, partisans and pundits switch sides on political principles depending on who wins and who loses."

Jacob criticizes this for it being "a lazy substitute for making and defending real value judgments: I don't have to be able to show which principles are good ones if I can just show

that you violate your own.” But, as irritating as this is, he also points out, it’s at least a nod to the commonly agreed upon fact that there are principles to be had. Really, as stoking of resentment as this whole bitter game is, it at least affords us as a society to rearticulate the “norms and principles that officials, institutions, and citizens can use as benchmarks.” In short, shaming someone for not living up to the principle once professed, or not fulfilling the norm long held as ideal, at least gives us all the chance to hear once again a principle professed or to regard once again a norm long held steady.

Mr. Trump’s response to Bill O’Reilly blasted right through that practice. When pushed, when Mr. O’Reilly reminded Mr. Trump, “Putin’s a killer,” Mr. Trump threw the fact into a disturbing moral equivalency: “There are a lot of killers. We’ve got a lot of killers. What, do you think our country’s so innocent?”

The tape always cuts off there, so I don’t know how Mr. O’Reilly responded. As for Jacob, though, no blind American Exceptionalist himself, he admits: “There’s often been real hypocrisy in American denunciation of authoritarians, dictators, warmongers and killers. The United States has shed a lot of blood, including innocent and civilian blood.” Then, reciting clear examples from long ago and from recent day, Jacob makes this argument, which struck me first as strange but now I think as true — that this “hypocrisy was itself an acknowledgement that America aimed to do better. The public expected, and elites at least tried to deliver, a government that could claim the moral high ground.”

This op-ed came out on Wednesday, a few days after I first sat seriously with the texts for this week. I hadn’t been looking forward to it. Jesus’ preaching packs a punch. In these antitheses (“You have heard it said..., but I say unto you...”) Jesus raises the expectation of how those who follow him shall *be*. As he sees it, and as he lays it out to those listening, it isn’t enough to follow the law. Now our *hearts* need to be in the right place, too.

“You have heard it said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder;’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you are liable to the council.”

I remember a conversation I had a long time ago about this passage from scripture. Talking with a psychotherapist around the time I graduated from divinity school, I listened as he declared these antitheses as repressive. Granted, he was no fan of Christianity in general —

and maybe this is one reason why. He claimed that to proscribe certain behaviors is fine, good, makes total sense. Of course we shouldn't commit murder. Of course we shouldn't commit adultery. But to proscribe certain feelings—anger, lust, quiet if insulting condemnation (you fool!): that takes it too far. Who can live like that—because really, to live without anger is pathological; to live without silently insulting this person or that person is self-policing to a crippling degree. Then to add to these negative feelings the shame of feeling them in the first place: the whole thing is a cocktail for passive aggression, repression, denial, or self-sabotage.

I don't know why that conversation has stuck with me so definitively. But it has. I remember feeling embarrassed for having ever held these aspirations as personal aims. I remember feeling unsophisticated, a pious simpleton for having ever thought Jesus' preaching such ideals was good of him, enlightened.

It doesn't help that the language Jesus used in preaching of these things is heightened, almost hysterical. If I decide in my own mind about someone else, "You fool," I'd be liable to the hell of fire? If I look at something and what I see makes me lustful for the thing, my desire now distorted and disordered, I should tear out my eye? Or if I grasp for something that's not worthy of wanting, I should cut off my hand?

And what about what he said about divorce? Preachers all over the mainline church this morning are dreading having to preach on this passage because our sanctuaries are filled with people who've been divorced—good, faithful, kind people whose marriages have ended for reasons of all sorts. How shall we preach that this is akin to committing adultery? Really, the same thing?

I found myself wondering this week how the Sermon on the Mount might land differently if my encounter with it were as a preached thing rather than a written-down thing. Because the experience of these two modes is different. As I've offered readings of my book, three times in three different settings, I've been struck by the fact that each time at least one person who's come to the reading having already read the book nevertheless appreciated hearing me read from it aloud. It changed the experience of interacting with the sermons collected in the book, they've said. Though I'm very much a manuscript preacher, that what I speak of the sermon is what I've written down in preparation for preaching and what will remain as an artifact of the preaching, nonetheless *hearing* the sermon rounds out the

experience, fills it out and in, maybe even humanizes it. It's no longer only just text, it's also context and pretext. It's no longer just words on a page; it's also people in relationship with one another, and with ideas and ideals.

All this said, I wonder how the language of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount might have landed among those who first heard it. Was there a sense of play here, even a joke?

To be clear, hearing this preaching as playful, though, shouldn't suggest that we not take it seriously. On the contrary, play of this sort can underscore seriousness.

And what's at stake in these situations that Jesus imagined was serious, indeed. Disordered desire, especially in tight-knit communities of the sort the disciples were accustomed to living amidst, could (and does) really take a toll, could be (and often is) downright destructive. To want what my neighbor has, to grasp after it: these are risky tendencies, sometimes very risky. Small sleights can escalate quickly, which perhaps Jesus both well knew and meant to stanch before any real blood could be spilt.

If, however, there was no play in his preaching, if he was as strident as his words alone might suggest, that could be because Jesus actually *cared* about how we, each and all, are to live.

The other day I was caught off guard by a fury rising in me about where a meeting I was supposed to attend might be. We were to gather in a church—and it was a big one. It had many doors into it, but the most obvious ones were locked. It had many hallways once you made it inside, but none seemed to lead to where I needed to go. Finally, I called someone on my phone whom I knew would be at the meeting.

"Where *are* you?" I asked her.

I could hear her knowing laughter. "I know. This building is a maze."

"Don't laugh," I said, my own tone surprising me. "The church tells the world, 'All are welcome,' but our buildings say, 'Good luck finding your way in.'"

"You're right," she said, more seriously. "We're in the parlor."

"Well, where the hell is the parlor?"

"It's behind the kitchen."

"And that would be...?"

No surprise: this is a congregation in a tailspin of decline. And it shouldn't be—so prominently set on a bustling Main Street. My fury about it all, I think in retrospect, reveals

how much I care about this. If people feel called to the church, they should at least be able to figure out how to get in. The *last* thing the church should be doing is putting stumbling blocks in their way.

A third possibility about the stridency of what Jesus had to preach is as a corrective to what the people might have come to believe was their task as a people dedicated to God.

The text from Deuteronomy this morning is, apparently, a pivotal one in Jewish tradition and practice. The notion that Moses was pressing upon the people; the notion that these commandments, which God had given them to obey so to live, weren't beyond them but were close to them: this notion was an important one because Moses was about to leave the people. Having led them out of their servitude in Egypt, having guided them for forty years in the wilderness and having received the Law from God to give to the people, having helped them implement it and organize their lives around it that they together might *live*, Moses would soon be leaving them. Moses would soon be going to his own death while the people were to settle in the Promised Land. But the question remained, perhaps even haunted them: could the people go on absent their teacher, their *prophet*? Could the people do this themselves?

When Moses said, in this nearly final time of addressing the people, that the commandment set before them that day wasn't too hard for them, that it wasn't too far away — neither in heaven nor somewhere mysterious across the sea, but indeed was within them and among them — he was saying that the people *could* do this, that they'd been given what they needed in order to choose for themselves life and prosperity.

What this looks like in Jewish tradition and practice, as I understand it, is a clear-eyed engagement with the world as it is, a practical negotiation within the limits and constraints of given circumstances. More specifically, these three verses are a recognition that the people will be operating very much in this world, where compromise and trade-offs and bargaining are all in play. This isn't about purity; this about living together. This isn't about holiness and righteousness; this is about striking upon a common good. There is a heavenly domain, of course. But the people live in the world. There is godliness, of course. But to be human is more complicated than that. There is absolute wisdom, but the people are to be guided by things more provisional, things more mundane.

In divinity school, where I was privy to regular interreligious dialogue, I remember Jewish students taking issue with the ways Christians spiritualized Hebrew texts. I remember this general impression, that much of Jewish practice was about *doing* right, while much of Christian tradition reinterpreted such things to be about *intending* the right. And maybe I've overdrawn this in my mind, but I have to say, I appreciated the critique. Jesus was a Jew, after all. So it's helpful to remember that Jesus, as such, might be less interested in our good intentions than in our actually doing of the good. Jesus might be less interested in our purity and piety than in our willingness to compromise for the sake of slightly better, of good enough. "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good enough," Jesus might have said to church folks who can get pretty tweaked up.

And all this is helpful, I think. All this—the reminder to take the world as it is, the goad to engage within the boundaries of human reality—is helpful. It keeps my feet on the ground, and insists on us all being willing to get our hands dirty. We're none of us going to be pure and clean when all is said and done. We're none of us going to get out of here without having to negotiate with things we find unsavory, unappealing.

But this is also: that there is the perfect, that there *is* the absolute. Though we don't live there (not yet, not yet) there is a reality that is beyond compromise.

And it's in recognition of this reality that I can hear Jesus antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount most helpfully.

"They're aspirational," Devora said plainly (and therefore helpfully) at the meditation group on Monday—and though when taken point by point they may feel pointed indeed, taken as a whole they serve as a reminder that, on the one hand, there's the ground up from which we build our lives, the baseline for our living together; and, on the other hand, there's the high sky toward which we grow and strengthen, like sunflowers stretching toward the light.

And, yes, those aspirations can feel overwhelming, even shaming and condemning. Yes, they cast into full relief all the ways we fall short. They call us to reckon with the reality that we aren't there yet, not by far.

And yes, too, they can also then repress us, or push into a corner of denial and externalizing, of holier-than-thou self-righteousness.

But how much worse would we be without them: without the high standard to which Christ calls us, without the heavenly ideal for which we're being made. How much worse would we be if we let them go altogether.

I don't know when it is in human development that the drive for maturation falls away. I remember watching my two boys, each as babies, work so hard to gain the strength to hold up their own heads, work so hard to get to crawling and then so hard to walk. I remember watching them work harder than I tend to (not unless I have a deadline) and I would wonder, when does that drive fall away? When do we as humans then need external goads and standards in order to continue to grow? When are growth and learning and strengthening all matters for cultivating as valuable for their no longer being inborn drives?

I still haven't figured it out, but I do hear myself saying more and more as a mother of now tweenagers, "Got off the couch! Quit flopping around and find something to do—or I'll give you something to do. (Laundry. Empty the dishwasher. Feed the dogs. Take out the recycling.)" I don't know when it happens, but I know that it does—when slowly or suddenly we need some high standard to get us off our butts and striving toward something, something good.

Jacob noted of Trump's casual shrug ("There are a lot of killers. We've got a lot of killers. What, do you think our country is so innocent?"): this "abandons the striving idealism" that makes the United States what it is. Consider: we're not a "nation," not in the sense that would give us "natives" and would fuel "nativism" as anything other ideological idiocy. We're not a bloodline, not even to the degree that some peoples can be understood as a bloodline. We're a country, a landmass within set borders; and a law, which all people in this country are equal under and answerable to. Really, America is largely something you convert to, notional as much as national. So, to shrug off the notion that we ought to be better than we are, better than we need to have pointed out to us that we are (hypocrites!): to shrug these off is to fall into some very ugly territory.

Jacob concludes that "compared to nihilism, hypocrisy is a vice well worth preserving"—and because in having our hypocrisy called out for what it is, we also hear once again what ideals are to be our aim and end, what high standards are to continue to give our lives purpose and shape.

If we give up on those, if we as Americans dive into the muck of relativism and moral equivalencies (knowing that we're good because we're not as bad as we could be): that's giving up something essential. But if we as the Church give up on those, if we accept that we just live in the world, full stop; if we give up the hope and faith that we're also living amidst a promise that is fulfilled already and not yet: then that's giving up everything. Then we might as well keep our most obvious doors in, locked, boarded up.

The church is to occupy the space between how the world is and how the kingdom would have us be. We're to dwell in that firmament formed in the story that separates the waters above from the waters below. We're to be a people risking being called hypocrites because we dare to strive to live by a law so high it will take all our lifetime to cultivate such excellence and faithfulness.

This high striving we are *right* to expect of our country, so that when nihilism takes hold as a dominant spirit, as I feel it is now, we are right to grieve. Lord knows that's what I've largely been up to. But our country and its governance aren't the only place where this excellence is to be cultivated; they're not even the primary place or the best place.

No, for that we have the church. And for that, thanks be to God.