

Sixth Sunday After The Epiphany – 2023
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

How many of y'all think that you could make it on Madison Avenue, the advertising capital of the world? How many of y'all think that you possess a brilliant marketing mind? I can almost hear your conversations now, as you sit on the couch, watching the tele, and a commercial comes on and you say "What does *that* have to do with what they're selling? I could totally write a better commercial than that non sequitur nonsense." And you're probably right. Let me show you how my mind works. You and I, we're tasked with selling mattresses. We could go the dreamy route, the elegant bed, the promise of enhanced rest or we could go down the reality road a little ways. What's the reality road? Microscopic images of what lives in a mattress that is over 10 years old. Oh, it's there. It's unseen by the naked eye but it's definitely there. Unseen keeps a person unconcerned. Unconcerned doesn't buy a new mattress. Concerned gets in the car and drives directly to Sit 'n Sleep.

Does Jesus use a microscope? What does He want you to see? How interested are you in seeing it? The last thing that I want to do is to put the Lord Christ on Madison Avenue but He does have a brilliant mind, a teacher unlike any other. He knows you. His words speak to you. He diagnoses all of us and He moves us toward Himself – in love. Theologically, the metaphor I'm about to use is me. Theologically, it's you – the metaphor I'm about to speak is just about everyone on the planet. I've discovered that if I stand far enough away from the mirror I look pretty good – which is what I want, after all, to look good in my own eyes. I've discovered that if the light is low and I stand far enough away from the mirror, I look pretty good. I've discovered that if I prevent my eyes from focusing and the light is low and I stand far enough away from the mirror, I look pretty good. But that dang mirror – it's not going away! Do you know what Jesus does? Jesus pushes me toward the mirror and turns the lights up all the way and He sharpens my focus so that I have to take a good look.

Anyone who looks at another woman lustfully has already committed adultery (Matthew 5:28). Anyone who says: "You fool!" will be liable to the fire of hell (Matthew 5:22). I don't look very good! What is in the mattress of my soul? Jesus wants me to see what is there. Why? Why would the Lord want to bum me out? He said: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). We are sick. Everybody's sick. The law diagnoses us aright. The law drives us to Christ; that's where He wants us. The law drives us to Christ for there is no reprieve from the law and its demands other than Jesus and His blood.

How brave are you? It takes spiritual courage to look into the mirror of the law and not avert your gaze. What is there to be seen? Selfishness, greed, laziness; do you think that you are more righteous than the average Shmoe? Are there people you won't serve, people you won't love, people who are beneath you? Possessions, money, wardrobe, car and house – do you derive your identity from these? How brave are you? The brave look into the mirror knowing they won't be charmed by what they see.

Jesus said this: “Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19). Let’s say that the law is a scalpel. Do you want the surgeon using a sharp scalpel or a dull one? Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments, whoever dulls the blade of the law will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. Why? Why would dulling the blade of the law be dangerous for Christians, dangerous for Christ’s church? Because it puts people at risk. Most people want to stand far away from the mirror and keep the light low and prevent their eyes from focusing. Some pastors think that they are providing a service to God’s people by helping them stay far away from the mirror and keeping the light low and distracting their focus so they don’t take a hard look. That’s like a surgeon intentionally dulling the scalpel before surgery. It’s dangerous spiritually. It is unfaithful, like perpetually keeping God’s people on the milk, not serving solid food (1 Corinthians 3:2).

You are selfish. Appearances mean way too much to you. You judge your neighbor and you repeat the same sins over and over without a real determination to change. Are you brave? Do you know what makes us brave? Christ’s blood makes us brave. We can look into the bright mirror of the law and know that our redemption is near. We *are* brave. We can admit that we are sick because the Good Physician spent His blood to heal us of sin and death. We *are* brave. We turn from looking at ourselves to looking at the King on His throne, His cross. He is the righteous One. He is the end of the law (Romans 10:4), the law perfected, the law fulfilled and enacted. The Son of God is the perfect man and His righteousness had been credited to you. We *are* brave. When God the Father looks upon you He sees Jesus, for you are clothed in His righteousness (Galatians 3:27). You have been baptized into Christ. You are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). His love is alive in you.

Gratitude spills from your heart – gratitude to the God who loves you and gave Himself up for you (Galatians 2:20). Gratitude, faith, and love lead you to serve others. God has prepared those good works for you to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). The brave, the recreated, those who are God’s workmanship, they *joyfully* walk in the works prepared in advance by God for them to walk in. The callous miss so much. The less sick you think you are, the less you need a cure. The less you need a cure the less grateful you will be for Christ’s blood. The less grateful for Christ’s blood a person is the less that person loves others. We are brave here. We will look into the mirror of the law. We fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:1-2). He is doing a work in us. The Lord Christ is bringing about His life in us. What a marvel, what a privilege, what a joy. God is at work in you to will and to act according to His good purpose (Philippians 2:13). The rhythm of the law and the gospel is forming us into the image of His Son (Romans 8:29). The vine of Christ is alive in this place (John 15:1). Branches attached to that vine love God with their whole heart and love their neighbors as themselves (John 15:5). That is the life that is alive in you.

As your pastor, I’m supposed to wield an exceedingly sharp scalpel. After being cut by the law the Gospel is your dressing. The love of Christ binds your wounds and enriches the soul. God longed to be reconciled to you. You couldn’t do it. You couldn’t initiate it. You don’t have the means to repair what is broken between you and God. The law is your accuser. The law could take you to court. The law has compiled a massive amount of evidence against you. The accuser would hand you over to the judge and you would be cooked. The judge would hand you to the

guard and you would be put in prison. What stopped this sequence? “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus reconciled you to His Father. The law accused Him. Guilty! Your sin was on Him. That made Him genuinely guilty. The scalpel of the law cut Him and cut Him and cut Him and cut Him. He chose Life as He died. He chose you; He chose for you to live. The Son of Man loved the Lord His God and obeyed His voice and laid down His life (Deuteronomy 30:20). The Son of God drank the cup of suffering and filled it up with His blood (Luke 22:42).

The sacrament of His body and blood is a very present reconciliation. You and He are bonded together. By that action we are bonded to one another. I love communing with my wife. We kneel together and unite with Christ and one another. Sometimes we have to resolve a conflict before church because we can’t commune while fractured. Love compels us to reconcile – Christ’s love. I know that such is in your life as well for I know that the Lord is present in each of you. We, as a church, have great unity here. We choose life, Christ’s life, and that life is abundant, present, and invigorating. God is giving us growth (Deuteronomy 30:16).