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The Heart of the Torah
By the Rev. Salying Wong

“Partisan politics! Where is our nation going?!” This could have been the lament of the first century Israelites—but it was religio-politics, as the two were wedded together. Jesus addresses some of the hot issues of the day among the Israelites as we move deeper into the Sermon on the Mount.

First, as you may recall, the sermon began by setting out the nature of the *repentant* perspective—that is, God’s Kingdom perspective, “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near”; Jesus describes this fresh perspective with the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for they will be called children of God.” Meaning, “Be encouraged you poor, for God sees your plight and his desire for your wellbeing is as a parent for their children.” Then, last week, Jesus tells the disciples that they are the ones God will use to encourage the poor and meek. “Y’all are the salt slab in the earthen oven that catalyzes the fuel, which warms the earth, which lights up the world.”¹ The disciples were tracking along with Jesus, imagining themselves as salt mixed with camel dung, as a salt slab holding the dung in the earthen oven, catalyzing a clean burning of the grasses and gasses in the dung. They could feel the heat; they could see the light—yes, they saw it! Then Jesus said, “Your righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees or else you can’t do Kingdom work.” This, my friends, is what we call a buzz-kill. How can that even be possible? There were no more righteous people in Israel than the Pharisees. They taught the law and how to practice it. Suddenly, the disciples crash into the wall of their theological imagination.

As I have said before, but want to underscore, the Pharisees are a trope in the gospels, representing religious people, especially leaders, who use religion for self-promotion. Particularly, the community of Matthew was at odds with the

¹ https://liturgy.sluhostedsites.org/5OrdA020523/theword_cultural.html

synagogue and they were very angry about the disintegrating relationship. Rather than seeing the trope as historically accurate, it is better to see the Pharisees as a trope for anyone who uses religion for power and for self-promotion, for anyone who thinks righteousness is a list of dos and don't. It is best to always be aware of these tendencies within ourselves.

So, having crashed into the wall of their theological imagination, today, Jesus helps his followers build something more spacious. Jesus gets them to think more deeply by arguing with the old interpretations of the scriptures. He takes on topics of murder, divorce and vow-making. At face value, these topics seem a bit random. But, Jesus is moving from a topic that everyone agrees is wrong (murder), to a topic that was very divided (divorce), to a topic that few would have thought was a problem (vow-making). In each "antithesis," he argues from the perspective of motivations and from the perspective of the beatitudes. Who is being hurt here? What is going on in the heart? How is human dignity being impaired here? What would liberate?

Today, I'd like to highlight the most controversial topic in Jesus' list: divorce. At the time of Jesus, there was a "two party system" of the interpretation of the Torah; anachronistically, we can call them the liberals and the conservatives—the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai. "Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai were famously divided over the issue of divorce. The school of Hillel favored a more permissive approach to divorce that allowed for divorce even in the case that a wife ruins her husband's meal. The school of Shammai, however, upheld a much stricter view that only permitted divorce in the most extreme cases."²

Jesus takes on both the liberals and the conservatives. Jesus goes to the heart of the Torah. The Torah isn't a list of to-do and not-to-dos. Yes, some of the statutes and ordinances are such. But its heart, its heart is summarized by two of its commandments. From Deuteronomy, "Love the Lord your God." From Leviticus,

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<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-521-37-5>

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” The heart of the Torah is about community, life, and the dignity of all.

Around the question of divorce, Jesus could have asked, “Where is the love for the beatitude-person in these ancient interpretations?” He might have added, “I mean, what about the woman? She is the most vulnerable person in these situations. We all understand that the man initiates the divorce in our time. Rabbi Hillel, this liberal, says divorce is permitted if your wife burns the pot-roast. All you have to do is give her a certificate of divorce. And then, you can leave this woman without safety and security, but with shame that damages her standing in her community. For Rabbi Shammai, this conservative, divorce isn’t permitted except in the most extreme cases. But, I ask you, what if the dignity of the woman is injured? I tell you, you injure the dignity of your wife even if you fantasize about another person. You have already committed adultery in your heart. I ask you, what is in the heart? What is a marriage? Is it merely about property, as we have come to assume—a man owning a woman? I tell you, this is a marriage: A marriage ought to uphold the dignity of each person, but most especially the dignity of the beatitude-person.”

By addressing the questions of the day, Jesus shows his followers that discipleship is not about absconding from a broken and painful world, but about speaking words of life and liberation into a world fraught with confusion, sinfulness, and violence. By testing old interpretations, by questioning the heart, by asking the law, “What is most life-giving, what is most liberating, what is most respectful of human dignity?,” he teaches his disciples—including all of us—how to engage the Torah as a living thing. Today, when we consider our own hot topics, we could follow Jesus by similar questions: who is the beatitude-person? Is it the queer person? Is it the immigrant? How must our old ideas adjust to liberate and lift up their dignity? He teaches us to take in the breath of the Torah, which is life.

Jesus very clearly said that he had not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill every jot and tittle. The fulfillment of the law means practicing it in ways that liberate, in ways that give life, in ways that lift up the dignity of the most vulnerable. All

around, the poor and the meek are crying for help and for justice. And we, we the salt, we the light, we are commissioned to spend our hearts for beatitudes-sake.