

**Sunday, February 16, 2014**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “Clear Directions”**

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Many years ago when I was advocating for laws to protect victims of domestic violence a seasoned legislator said to me “It won’t work. You can’t legislate behavior.” At the time I didn’t understand what he meant. Today’s passage of Jesus’ sermon on the mount makes exactly the same point, only now I understand what it means and see the profound truth in the lesson.

The point Jesus is making is that following the literal interpretation of the commandments is not enough.

It is not particularly difficult for any of us to make a decision not to murder on a day-to-day basis, but it is a monumental challenge not to get angry or to carry that anger around with us or to take the important steps of forgiveness and reconciliation.

It is not the end point that concerns Jesus it is the process.

It is not just the actions but the attitude that matters.

One writer put it this way:

“If you look at all the "laws" Jesus offers in today's reading you will see that he moves from outward observance to heart attitude in every case. Instead of focusing on murder, Jesus confronts anger. Instead of adultery, he confronts lust and the abuse of women in divorce. In place of vow-making, Jesus calls for a commitment of heart that requires no dramatic promises. The law can control the worst that human beings can do, but it cannot motivate people to live up to their best. Only a heart that is transformed by love can do that, and that is the essence of Jesus teaching.”

The law- the Torah - was not meant to be a stick to force us to live well, but the guideline for hearts that are captivated by God and by love.

It is easy for some people to make faith about what we think, determining whether we are "in" or "out" by certain ideas that we consider to be "essential" to faith.

It is also easy to make faith about a list of rules that we either do or don't do, and to view those who fail to follow our rules as "out" while we, who obey the rules, are "in".

These approaches were as common in Jesus' day as they are in ours, but he taught a different path in which we seek to have our hearts so captured by the dream of God's Reign that it becomes the motivation, the pattern, and the guide for all our thinking, doing, interacting, choosing and loving. And, when we are captivated by God's Reign, our lives reflect the character and purpose of Christ to those around us in ways that bring life and blessing to them.

We are compelled to truly treat others as we want to be treated ourselves.

We are motivated to create the type of community that we want to live in.

I often say that if all the followers of all the world religions actually followed their core teachings, this would be heaven.

We would live in peace, motivated by compassion, surrounded by love.

Our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy puts these lifestyle choices squarely in front of us.

The writer makes it clear that it is up to us – to you – to make a choice about your own life.

Do you want to live a life of blessings or a life of curses?

Again, this is much more about attitude than actions.

I read a great line this week that said, “Neuroscientists and psychologists are now discovering how right Jesus was - our behavior is determined far more by our heart, by what we love or desire, than by what we think.”

I particularly love when I come upon a secular teaching that someone claims as their own only to find that it is an echo of scripture.

I recently read an article and an essay about the culture of apology that permeates our public sphere.

The authors were lamenting the diminishment of true apologies – the loss of heartfelt pleas for forgiveness.

Dov Seidman, an observer of societal trends and the founder of a firm that advises companies on their cultures and how they can translate them into better performance, has been tracking the apology trend for many years. He reports becoming so troubled — and offended — by the ease with which apologies seem to roll off the tongues of our leaders that he called for an “apology cease-fire” in a talk at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, Switzerland last month.

“Sorry” he says, “has become one of the easiest and most convenient — and therefore least meaningful — words there is.”

“Business, politics, media, academia, sports and celebrity – virtually every aspect of our public lives – are in the midst of a dangerous apology crisis. The mea culpas, he says, have kept on coming to the point where they are reaching the level of parody.”

Unfortunately, I would add church to his list.

Mourning the loss of the genuine apology he proposed an apology cease-fire.

During this introspective moratorium, we should pause and think long and hard about what a real apology means and requires.

When you've committed an act that damages a relationship, or breaks a promise, or humiliates or compromises someone, you have serious work ahead of you. You need to earn back trust and change your behavior in a way that proves, without question, that you mean it.

Dovia's criteria could be lifted out of Jesus' sermon on the mount.

He identifies five essential characteristics of authentic apologies:

They must be painful. If an apology doesn't create vulnerability and isn't therapeutically painful, it's not an apology at all. Well, Jesus suggested you tear out your eye if it has caused you to sin - point well taken.

They must be authentic and not an excuse. An apology can't have ulterior motives or be a means to an end. This would fall under the purity of heart category listed in psalm 119.

They must probe deep into the personal or organizational values that permitted the offense. Apologizers need to conduct a "moral audit" by looking themselves in the mirror and asking, "How did I get here and how did I drift from the person I aspire to be?" What a great exercise for Lent. A moral audit.

They must encourage feedback from the aggrieved. This includes truly opening up to input and two-way conversation during and after an apology, and embracing ideas as to how to improve. This practice resonates with our commitment this year to 'deep listening.' It is not an apology if the other person doesn't receive it.

They must turn regret into a real change in behavior. The new behaviors they elicit must be continuing, reinforced by a sustained investment in avoiding the same mistakes in the future.

Dovia concludes his essay, "Apologies can and should be hugely important actions and mechanisms, blessed with enormous power and lasting impact. But they must be two-way exchanges of trust and healing that are open and transparent."

I think that criteria can be assigned to any interpersonal relationship – not just apologies.

Jesus calls us into relationship and gives us clear criteria how to make those relationships healthy and whole, nourishing and nurturing. God has created us with the ability to choose between a life of blessings and a life of curses.

I leave you with the words of the prophet Joshua 25:14:

Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."