

**Sermon for Sunday, February 12, 2023**  
**Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**“Life in the Beloved Community”**  
**Reverend Amy Zalk Larson**  
**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**  
**Decorah, Iowa**

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Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Author Philip Yancey tells about meeting a woman who was in desperate straits. She was homeless, sick, and unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. She'd turned to prostitution to survive. He writes, "I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure shock that crossed her face. 'Church!' she cried. 'Why would I ever go there? I'm already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse.'"<sup>1</sup>

My heart aches for people who've been harmed by the church and the ways the church has weaponized scripture. I know there are many of you who have been harmed by these passages about divorce and remarriage that have been taken out of context. Jesus was trying to protect and care for women who were viewed as property in his time. Today, a Christ-like ethic of care and protection recognizes that many marriages have already ended long before a divorce happens and that staying in unhealthy marriages is harmful. A Christ-like ethic rejoices in the many wonderful marriages that come after a divorce. When I think about those marriages in this congregation, I give thanks. Your marriages are a witness to Christian resurrection, hope and new life. Thanks be to God.

Yet it isn't just this stuff about divorce that's hard to hear. This whole part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount today is tough. It can leave me feeling a bit like that woman Philip Yancey met. Really Jesus? I want to say. We already feel bad about ourselves, this just makes things worse. Yet then I remember what Jesus was all about in his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus isn't giving a lecture on morality to a bunch of individuals. That's often how it sounds to us as 21st Century, individualistic Americans. We hear harsh admonitions to shape up and try to get everyone else out there to get in line too. We hear these as instructions for individuals, forgetting too, that they are out of context.

But Jesus is doing something else in his sermon. He's speaking to the whole group of his disciples, including us, and calling forth a new community, a blessed community, a beloved community. A community that Jesus hopes will embody God's love and mercy and care so that we can live differently, honoring relationships and one another for the sake of witness to God's love. He instructs all of us disciples to take relationships with one another very seriously, to go beyond the bare minimum of the letter of the law, to go the extra mile in caring for the dignity and honor of others.

So Jesus, you may think that it's easy to avoid committing murder. You've heard it said, do not murder. Most of us can avoid, most of the time, feeling murderous rage. Or, maybe we feel it

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<sup>1</sup> Yancey, Philip. *What's So Amazing About Grace*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

but we can avoid acting on it. But there are so many other ways that we kill others through a refusal to love; so many ways we treat others as less than human and cut off from relationship; so many ways we inflict soul-killing violence on each other through our words, our silences, our judgments, our indifference. And Jesus says, we've got to look at that. That's important.

And Jesus says, you may think I'm not an adulterer, I don't commit adultery. But consider all the other ways we use and exploit people for our own pleasure, that we see others as just objects to get our own needs and desires met. Jesus says we've got to look at that. We've got to look deeper, look at the heart. And don't think I'm better than that person, I'm better than that woman who is a prostitute.

Jesus says this way of being in relationship is what is needed in this community, in that context, and in ours. Then we have to keep thinking it through because Jesus took the law really seriously; but he kept interpreting it. He said, "You've heard it said ... but I say to you." So, this is the ongoing work in community of saying, what does it mean, in this context, to take relationships seriously and act in Christ-like ways? That's the work the church does together.

But what happens when we can't live these out? Are we liable to the fires of hell like Jesus says? Those words call to mind Dante's inferno and eternal damnation. Except Jesus uses the word Gehenna when he talks about hell. Gehenna was the place outside Jerusalem where the garbage was burned. Jesus is referencing an actual physical place of fire and terrible smells. It seems Jesus is saying, if we live with anger continually, life's going to feel as bad as being in a fiery pit of garbage. If we let lust control us, we feed a fire that can become all consuming. If we ignore the dignity of others, it'll feel like we're living outside the city, in the dump, cut off from community.

Jesus' words seem more descriptive than prescriptive. We're going to create a hell on earth if we don't tend to relationships. This whole passage paints a vivid picture of what God desires for us and how often we fall short of it. It reveals just how much help we need. As 21<sup>st</sup> Century individualistic Americans, we tend to think we can fix everything through hard work and positive thinking and maybe a good book or podcast. Jesus shows us here that we can't live in healthy community and be in right relationships on our own. We need God's guidance and God's mercy and forgiveness when we fail. We need God to shape us into a community that practices reconciliation and humility rather than self-righteousness and judgment.

We need help. And nothing can stop God from giving that help. Christ Jesus enters every hell, every place of fire and brokenness to forgive, to heal, to form community, to bring resurrection, hope and new life.

Christ meets us here today.