

**“Tricky Territory”**  
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**Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia**  
**February 12, 2017**

**Deuteronomy 30:15-20**

15See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16If 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. 17But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, 18I 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. 19I 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, 20loving 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**

21“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22But 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. 23So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25Come 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. 26Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

27“‘You have heard that it was said, ‘you shall not commit adultery.’ 28But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29If 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. 30And 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.

31“‘It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32But 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.

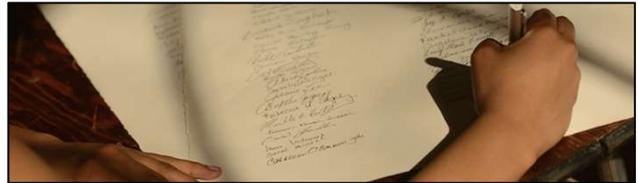
33“‘Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ 34But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

Where I went to college, Agnes Scott College, a small women's college in Decatur, Georgia, we had an honor code. An honor pledge. I suspect some of you did, too.



In the first week of my first year there was an assembly with all of the students. The code was discussed and then we all signed the code-written out on huge sheets of paper. Each class had their own sheet, and after they were signed those sheets were hung on the wall in the largest classroom building. Every day, one our way to class, we would pass by that code on the stairs, see our signatures and be reminded of what we had promised.

That code gave us freedom. We could trust one another. We had open exams. There were times for exams but times were not assigned for each class. When you were ready you would go to the main room, tell them your name and the name of the class and you would be handed the exam. All you had to do was sign, before handing it in, these words, "I pledge that I have neither given nor received any unauthorized aid on this exam."



You could space out your exams, taking the hardest first or the hardest last. You could save them for the end of the week or take them all at once at the beginning if you just needed to get them over with. It was up to you. Because it was up to all of us. We had all agreed to the system.

I've been thinking about this lately because of a recent news story about a graduate of a college with an honor code almost identical to Agnes Scott's, Davidson College, located near Charlotte, North Carolina. It's not surprising. They are both Presbyterian Colleges.

The news story about the graduate of Davidson isn't a good one. He's in the news because he wrote a news story.<sup>1</sup> A fake news story. 100% fake.

This past September, according to his own admission, Cameron Harris<sup>2</sup> sat down at his computer, and in 15 minutes create a fake news story about fraudulent ballots for one of the presidential candidates being found in a warehouse in Ohio.<sup>ii</sup> Harris placed the story, strategically, on a website he owned, a website with a Christian name, promoted it through Facebook accounts he had created to promote just such stories, and launched onto the world.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/us/fake-news-hillary-clinton-cameron-harris.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/us/fake-news-hillary-clinton-cameron-harris.html?_r=0)

<sup>2</sup> A screen shot of a fake article on Mr. Harris' website.

<https://static01.nyt.com/images/2017/01/19/us/00fakenews2/00fakenews2-blog427.png>

This wasn't the only fake news story Harris had created. He has admitted to many. This was the one, however, that really took off.



Why did he do this? Harris says it was about money, not about politics. He made money from the ads placed on the fake news site with the story he had written. Accounting records show the campaign he made \$22,000 from ad revenue for his fictitious stories.<sup>3</sup> The money, not the politics, was the point, he insisted. A recent college graduate, he says he needed to pay his living expenses. "I spent the money on student loans, car payments and rent," he said.

His story was told in the New York Times. I don't know if he's proud of what he did or ashamed, but I've got lots of friends who went to Davidson as well as similar schools like Agnes Scott and it became the topic of many emails. Their reaction has, without exception, been the same. "Wow. That's a clear violation of the honor code. How could a Davidson grad do such an obviously wrong thing?" It bothered them because it reflected upon them. For a few months, anyway, it will be the first thing about which many people ask them when they find out they went to Davidson. Such a clear violation of what the school claims to uphold- even among its graduates- makes them all look bad. The actions of one reflect upon the whole community. Not because Harris' actions look bad, but because they were bad.

That's the general point, the most basic point, of what Jesus is saying in this passage from Matthew. That what we do doesn't just affect ourselves, it affects the whole community. We are connected. To lift one another up, or drag one another down. But Matthew's words come in a pretty complicated package for 2017. Wrestling with this passage for a blessing takes us through some pretty tricky territory. Not so much the murder or the disagreement sections, but the ones about marriage and adultery.

It's important that we look at the nuances and layers of these texts, where Jesus is speaking literally. Where Jesus is speaking figuratively. Where Jesus is speaking seriously.

Consider verse 29 and what can happen if you claim everything in the Bible to be God's literal truth. "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away;" As a friend of mine, an Ophthalmologist, said recently, "figures of speech can have dire consequences." He can say that because he's had to deal with those consequences.<sup>4</sup>

Or consider divorce in this literal/figurative/serious balance. The church has, throughout time, done some pretty horrible things based on a superficial interpretation of this passage. I remember my own great-grand-aunt. Married to her husband for more than 50 years. But it wasn't her only

<sup>3</sup> "Cameron Harris in his home office in Annapolis, Md., on Monday. He created a fake story about an electrical worker who stumbled upon stacked boxes of ballots pre-marked for Hillary Clinton." Gabriella Demczuk for The New York Times" <https://static01.nyt.com/images/2017/01/19/us/00fakenews1/00fakenews1-master768-v2.jpg>

<sup>4</sup> Jamie Bryan, James A. Bryan III, MD, <http://www.carolina2020.com/james-a-bryan-iii-md/>

marriage. In her early twenties, there was another marriage. A violent marriage she was fortunate to escape. When she did fall in love and wanted to get married, she and her, then, fiancé were rejected by every church to which they were connected. Because she was divorced, they were seen as unacceptable. It created wounds, later scars, that never fully healed.

And those were just the policies. It says nothing about the comments, gossip, hurtful actions across the years. The pain of the divorces themselves that churches haven't faithfully helped.

We haven't been faithful to these passages, which were written for a very different world. A very different world in which marriage, and divorce, were built on economics and familial ties. And in which women had little say or power.

When Jesus says these things that seem discordant, he is not writing new law, he is not wiping out law which allowed both divorce and remarriage, Jesus is suggesting a new way of looking at things. He is proclaiming that women are not "things," property which can be discarded at will. He is, actually, upholding the value of healthy relationship. And as the first six verses of our passage today discuss, not just the value of healthy individual relationships but our relationships together, as a community.

Professor Carla Works writes<sup>5</sup>,

Jesus wants his disciples to be people of integrity.... They should be people who honor their commitments in marriage and who respect the commitments of others.

Jesus' teaching on adultery and divorce reinforces the dignity of women and warns against a culture of male privilege. In the first century....Wives could be cast aside for ridiculous reasons, including burning bread.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to a world where women were treated like property, Jesus' mission allowed women to be disciples.

[Jesus is teaching that] The women in their midst are not people to be used and abandoned at will, but fellow disciples. They are among the ones who are now blessed by God's reign.

When you are willing to travel this tricky territory, and engage Jesus' larger message in this Sermon on the Mount you find that the greater message isn't about the legalities of our marriages but about the ways in which we live our lives, together.

Jesus is going way beyond here. Way beyond the "I dos" and papers that are signed to signify a legal relationship or dissolution of that relationship, he is talking about the ways in which we live.

In the same way that true peace is not simply the absence of violence, a good relationship isn't defined by simply the absence of cheating, it is about how you listen and love and respect and care and work, together.

Theological Amy Oden shares,<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2033](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2033)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=795](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=795)

[These teachings] become doorways into the examination of many internal dynamics as well as external behaviors of one's life....

Perhaps one of the most radical aspects of Jesus' extension of the law here is his internalization of it, so that not only behaviors, but attitudes and emotions fall within its scope. Of course, this is not new to Jewish thinking. Throughout Hebrew Scriptures, the law is to be taken to heart and not only outwardly. Jesus connects the dots for his listeners from outward acts to internal orientation,...It is one thing to or behave rightly. It is another thing entirely for one's heart to be oriented toward love. Just as it is easier to make a sacrifice at the temple than it is to do justice [as last week's passage from Micah 6 taught], so it is easier to keep the commandment against murder than it is to avoid anger in one's heart.

Jesus offers.... a reign of God ethic, one already hinted at in the list of beatitudes preceding this discourse. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the pure in heart--all of these are blessed not because they are exemplars of the law, but because of their inward orientations of heart. The righteousness of this newly inaugurated kingdom of God is more than following rules. It requires and empowers a life surrendered to God and neighbor.

Professor Karoline Lewis offers<sup>7</sup>:

...the actions of your individual faith actually matter for the individuals sitting next to you in the church pew every Sunday. That what you do during the week might reflect on or give witness to your fellow parishioner. That who you choose to be in the world is not only a revelation of yourself, but also a manifestation of those with whom you are in relationship or claim connection. When we start thinking and understanding that our actions not only reveal who we are but also the communities of which we are a part, we begin to feel the weight of what it means to be a member of a community—and we should.

at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount.... is the premise of Jesus as Emmanuel. When we remember that God is with *us*, not just that God is with *me*, we begin to realize we are not simply members of community but shapers of community and are shaped by community, all of which tells a critical theological truth—our God is a God of community.



This is NOT a Buddy Jesus, agreeing with everything you say or do. This is NOT a simplistic “all we need is love” message, this is about the really hard work that goes into welcoming the Kingdom of God, which is the only thing that can really save us, transform us, from the things that seek to, the things that have divided us.

It is telling the truth. Living lives that consider the needs of others. Loving one another. Loving, praying for, the people you don't like, or who don't like you. Seeking to get closer to those who are different. Listening for the voices that are not heard. When you are hurt, doing the work of

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3157](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3157)

healing. When you do the hurting, admitting your wrong and engaging in rebuilding, where you can, what has been broken.

It is the Honor Code beneath all other Honor Codes, the word and wish and will of the God who created, redeems, and sustains us all.

Now, I don't know how all of this makes you feel, but it's a bit daunting to me.

It's WAY daunting. Because this is real and the stakes are high and wow, this is such a long road to travel.

The Good News is that there is Good News. The flip side of realizing that everything we do reflects on the communities of which we are a part means good things as well as the not-good.

Just as Davidson College was thrust into the headlines recently for the negative actions of Cameron Harris, so it was also in the headlines, slightly less recently, with these positive words from career educator Elizabeth Kiss, President of Agnes Scott College and a graduate of Davidson college.<sup>8</sup>



“What Davidson did was expose me to a whole community of people who embodied a culture of honor, service and excellence.... [a] holistic emphasis on preparing students not only to excel academically but to aspire to a meaningful and impactful life.... I learned about the strength of community and how the support and nurturing that builds your foundation gives you the confidence to lead and spread your wings.”<sup>9</sup>

Being tied to community means that we are not alone. We are not solo navigators on this journey left to analyze every sign-post or turn on our own. We have each other. People to whom we are bound not only by choice but by baptism, ties whose strength can survive any test, because we have been knit together by God. Ties that can stretch and ties in which we can rest when we get weary.

It's the class who refuses to stop cheering until the last student has finished the race.

It's the friend who posted on Facebook on the anniversary of her husband's death, “Thanks for the love everyone, felt it all day long yesterday. Love to all of you too- don't know how we would have made it without each and every one of you- lifting us up!”

And there is one other thing we must never forget. Grace.

A few years ago preaching professor Mike Graves, told the story about the time when he traveled out-of-town to gather with a friend and his friend's large extended family for a celebratory weekend. When it became time for the 19 of them to go out to dinner, Mike and one other of the

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.agnesscott.edu/president/presidents-biography.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://davidsonjournal.davidson.edu/2014/12/game-changers/>

group went early to the restaurant to get their name on the list.  
Graves said<sup>10</sup>:

The restaurant was packed. I wiggled through the crowd to the front of the line and found an Amish man standing behind an old pulpit. Next to him was a hand-carved sign:



“Please do not give your name until everyone in your party is present.”

I understood the reason for the restaurant’s policy, but I also knew that it would take a long time for a table for 19 to be ready. I said, “Yes, the name is Graves, party of 19.” The Amish man with his beard and hat looked at me and said, “And is your whole party present?” Haltingly

I said, “Yes.” OK, I lied. But it wasn’t as if I were trying to beat the system. After all, even the smaller parties were waiting for 30 minutes, so we’d be putting in our waiting time too. No big deal.

But my colleague disagreed.... [you shouldn’t lie, he said.]

“By the time they call our name,” I said, “Joe and his family will be here.” Two minutes later came the announcement: “Graves, party of 19.” I went back....and said, “Yes, the Graves party—well, uh, we’re not all here yet.” ...The man looked me in the eyes and asked, “Did you lie?” Dead silence....The people immediately around us waited, wide-eyed and wondering.

I replied softly, “Yes, I lied.” “Come with me,” he said. I couldn’t imagine what he was going to do....We followed him through the restaurant to the back, where he opened the door to a banquet room. A huge table was set with bread and jams. He offered a gentle smile. “Have some bread. You are forgiven.”

And so it is for us, friends.

God is with us.

And so it is for us.

Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-01/lies>