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Anyone else feel a bit of anxiety after hearing that Gospel? Me, too.

Before I begin, I want to give a bit of a disclaimer. This Gospel passage is rich, and multi-layered, and complex, and hard, and contextual. And it speaks to God's eternal truth. As with any homily, I can't begin to address all the layers, all the nuances, and all the ways it may or may not address your particular context. (This week, that is especially true.) So I encourage you to pray over it, wrestle with it, and be gentle with yourself as you discover where God's truth intersects with the message your soul needs to hear.

If we pan out and look at this from a broad perspective, there would be no need for God's people to be given the commandments if we weren't predisposed to behave in violent ways toward one another. If we were always seeking to serve the holy in others, there would be no murder, no abuse or neglect, no racial profiling, no political profiling, no need to covet our neighbor's wife or cow or summer vacation. But we do these things. We post mean-spirited memes, we treat those who make us uncomfortable as though they are invisible, we turn our backs on those in need because we convince ourselves that we don't have the time, or the energy, or the resources. And while these might not be deliberate acts of violence, we still betray the child-of-Godness inherent in each of us.

From a Christian perspective, this passage, like the rest of scripture, may be understood in the context of Jesus' greatest commandment:¹ "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment.

¹ Matthew 22:37-40

And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Love God. Love self. Love neighbor.

God calls us to engage every encounter in ways that are characterized by respect, rooted in integrity and lived out with intentionality, generosity, and heavy doses of grace. This is how we are to relate to our neighbors, as well as how we treat ourselves. By doing so, we reflect our love for God.

And that is what I believe lies at the heart of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, from which our Gospel passage is taken this morning.

One of my favorite children’s books is *Old Turtle and the Broken Truth* by Douglas Wood. I’ve read it countless times to my children, and I want to share a portion of it with you.

(text found here)²

“One night, in a far-away land that “is somehow not so far away,” a truth falls from the stars. As it falls, it breaks into two pieces; one piece blazes off through the sky and the other falls straight to the ground. One day, a man stumbles upon one piece of truth and finds carved on it the words, “You are loved.” It makes him feel good, so he keeps it and shares it with the people in his tribe. The thing sparkles and makes the people who have it feel warm and happy. It becomes their most prized possession, and they call it “The Truth.”

(read tree page and battle page: Those who have the truth grow afraid of those who don’t have it, who are different. And those who don’t have it covet it. Wars commence, emptiness follows for those who no longer possess their truth, and the people suffer.)

Soon people are fighting wars over the small truth, trying to capture it for themselves. A little girl who is troubled by the

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GTYbsl6UJE>

growing violence, greed, and destruction in her once-peaceful world goes on a journey—through the Mountains of Imagining, the River of Wondering Why, and the Forest of Finding Out—to speak with Old Turtle, the wise counsellor.

(read blue picture through snow picture: The girl asks if the world can heal and change from the conflict and hurt that continues to be perpetuated. Old Turtle explains things have not always been this way. He says the people hurt so badly and cling to their broken truth so tightly is because the truth they hold is incomplete, yet is so close to the whole Truth. Only when people begin to SEE one another and value each other that peace can come.)

... Old Turtle tells her that the Truth is broken and missing a piece, a piece that shot off in the night sky so long ago. Old turtle then gives her the missing, jagged piece of the Truth that came from the heavens, and the little girl puts it in her pocket and returns to her people. She tries to explain, but no one will listen or understand. Finally, she climbs to the top of the tall tower where the prized piece of truth has been ensconced for safety, and the re-joined pieces fit perfectly: their full message read “You are loved / and so are they.” And the people begin to comprehend. And the earth began to heal.”

Sadly, just like the people in this story, we have slowly slipped into a protective and righteous individualism, exclusiveness, and possessiveness. We have erected walls of entitlement and protection (this is my country; my property). We see with eyes of division (us and them; me against the world). We perceive in black and white (I am right; they are wrong).

Where has this gotten us?

We seem to be unable to communicate with each other; we look down on each other and hold each other in contempt; we feel threatened and angry and fearful. Just as it is portrayed in the story, conflict has developed which produces suffering and injustice. This is true on an interpersonal level, an international level, and everywhere in between. Overtly or covertly, we are committing acts of violence against one another.

Jesus is bringing us back to basics, to the root intentions behind the commandments ~ we are to love God, and love each other as ourselves, which he spells out later in Matthew's Gospel. Each of the scenarios Jesus mentions in this reading indicate that we are to work toward building holy, mutual, covenanted relationships with one another and refrain from diminishing the personhood of others. This is consistent with the values set forth in the Old Testament. And yes, we all fall short.

As we prayed at the beginning of our liturgy, due to the weakness of our mortal nature, we can do nothing good without God's help; may we be open to God's grace, that in keeping God's commandments, we may please God both in will and deed.

When we act in any way that diminishes another person, when we do anything less than respect the dignity of every human being, we reject the fulness of God's eternal Truth, and behave incompatibly with who we are as God's beloved children.

We are all made in the image of God. We are all beloved of God. We are all of immense value to God ~ and when we can treat one another (and ourselves) as though every person is of immense value, then we faithfully live into God's commandments.

You are loved. And so are they.