

There are incredibly brave people who walk among us.

They weren't always brave.

Becoming brave meant going through an experience most people wouldn't wish on their worst enemy. Many of them spend an hour at Redeemer, many 4 or 5 times a week. These brave people are those who attend one or more of the meetings here between Monday and Friday. Or, as they refer to it, "downstairs church".

We, the upstairs churchgoers, are asked by God and the prophets to follow Ten Commandments. Alcoholics Anonymous and the other recovery ministries founded by Bill W. and his friends are asked by their Higher Power to follow the Twelve Steps. Neither list is a cake walk. What makes them so profound is that they were not put in place to punish us for our past behavior, but to guide us as we walk into the future.

The key is that we must choose to follow.

Sirach, the prophet, calls choosing to follow the commandments a matter of life and death. The same may be said for the Twelve Steps. The point is that, for many of us, a life without structure, a life without accountability, quickly becomes a life spinning out of control.

I would imagine that *this* is why Jesus chose hyperbole when he gathered his disciples on the mountain. He needed to drive home the point that these rules of Moses go deeper than being a few suggestions on how to get along with God and each other. Jesus was making the point that the slippery slopes of unaccountability lurk just beyond our understanding.

“But,” you say. “Being angry is hardly equal to killing someone.”

True. Yet when we read the newspaper headlines, or tune into the latest podcast, we discover that murder often was the result of anger, rage, argument, or jealousy.

“How can an insult make me liable for hell? Sometimes my siblings and I insult each other for fun. We don’t really mean it.”

Ah, but how do you know that's how it's being received? How well do you know the person with whom you are trading barbs? Could you actually be inflicting damage without realizing it?

About that offering at the altar that Jesus talks about – do you understand that being reconciled with someone you may have a quarrel with is the reason for the Peace? We love our hugs and handshakes, but have you ever used that time to say that you're sorry to someone? Cuz, honestly, that's what that time is meant for.

No, we don't have to cut off our arms and pluck out our eyes:

IT'S HYPERBOLE!

And, since we're talking about lust, I'm glad eyes and arms were the only thing Jesus said to cut off! Think about it though, wandering eyes and inappropriate touching may not go the distance toward adulterous behavior but it can be just as damaging.

Then, there's Jesus' discourse about divorce. Each time I preach on this passage, I feel the need to say that no one-NO ONE-should stay in a marriage that is harmful, physically or mentally. Marriage is, above all, for the mutual joy of the partners. When that joy is undercut by violence or infidelity, there is no joy. Sometimes, the death of the marriage precedes the death of one of the partners. You probably know someone for whom this is true.

Remember that in the first century, and it continues today in many countries, anything a man said was a legitimate reason to divorce a woman. A woman without a husband finds herself in dire straits. The point of the divorce teaching is that men need to treat their wives as human beings. Women are not possessions that could be thrown away on a whim.

Don't make a big production over the vows you take, Jesus asks. Make it "Yes Yes or No No". Make a decision. Follow or don't. Adding drama to your decision by swearing on heaven or earth or C-SPAN isn't going to help you keep your promises. In fact, it makes it more pathetic when (not if) you fall short – and no one needs to see that.

Jesus is trying to help his disciples understand that the commandments were created to add structure and accountability to our lives AND to help us see each other as the beloved children of God that we all are.

When we stray even a little into the realm of discounting the humanity of one another, or the sacredness of the creation, the consequences can be beyond our ability to manage them. When we belittle people, when we stop seeing the divine within them, we cease to live into our call to be the body of Christ.

I believe we are there right now.

We need to find and muster the courage to uphold the structures and institutions that give us life and keep us accountable to each other in our common purpose. These structures are religious, like the Baptismal Covenant; spiritual, like the Twelve Steps; or judicial, like the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. These structures aren't just about right and wrong.

These structures are about how to live with each other, how to recognize the good in one another, and why we need to respect the good in each other.

They are about how we live in this world and why we need to take care of it.

They are there to help us lift each other up, so that no one is left on the margins.

They give us a means through which to make peace with each other, with ourselves, and with our higher power, however we define that power.

As our downstairs church friends would say, our structures are there to help us restore our sanity.

Before each person, the prophet Sirach says, are life and death.

Choose life, my friends. Choose life.

