



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Adultery, Lust, Divorce—and One Snowy Week

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 16, 2014  
The Sixth Sunday After The Epiphany—Based on Matthew 5:21-37*

It isn't enough that it has snowed for 40 days and 40 nights this week and that we have slipped, slid and "slushed" all week long. To top the week off, I now have the distinct privilege of preaching to you faithful souls about adultery, lust and divorce!

Most of us have heard this passage from what is known as the Sermon on the Mount all our lives. It is a series of moral teachings that Jesus gave—not so much, in my opinion, for the sake of being moral, as to tell his listeners how to live in the kingdom of God, the realm of God here on earth. Every verse in this long sermon—three chapters in Matthew—is in the end about showing us the way to live full, happy, and, yes, moral lives.

The brilliant conceit of most of Jesus' comments is the use of comparison and hyperbole. Living under the weight of an unreasonable interpretation of the law, his listeners could not believe their ears when he began to talk about the spirit of the law instead of its letter. The most pious would no more think of murdering than they would of flying to the moon, but many of them did not hesitate to let their intense disdain for those not in their group show—and not only show, but allow it to be the basis upon which positions of privilege and resources were determined. Jesus talked about things that mattered. Most people were not murderers then any more than most are not now. Jesus knew this, of course, and so he took the ethic of living morally in relationship to a whole new level. Don't act like jerks, don't use your sense of self-importance to justify arrogant behavior toward others, don't allow the normal emotion of anger to morph into a lifestyle characterized by hate toward all who are different from you—for to do so is destructive to others, as though you were murdering them. Of course, the pedagogy is hyperbolic but also quite effective.

Don't use your wrath, Jesus said, as justification for name calling, for to call someone a fool puts you in danger of hellfire. Parenthetically, this is one of the few bible verses I ever heard my mother quote. Or perhaps it is the only one I remember. She quoted it one day just after I had called my sister a fool—which at the time seemed like one of the nicest things I might have called her. Happily, neither Jesus nor Mother meant literally that I was headed for hell, but each knew deeply that dismissing another, even a very irritating older sister, in such a way separates us from God. You see the great danger is that in most cases we tend to define our anger, our rage, whatever its basis, as righteous. Though indeed it may often be—although probably not as regularly as we assume—it is to be expressed in a way that does not annihilate *in any sense* the other. A tag line in this portion on living reconciled lives is Jesus' note that it's better not to come to the altar than to come while we are internally raging at our brother or sister, terms I purport were used quite broadly by Jesus.

Former President Jimmy Carter, for many of us, will always be recalled as the one who brought alive in living color—in the pages of *Playboy* magazine no less—his interpretation of Jesus' teaching about lust and adultery. Just not doing it, Carter understood, is only the beginning of not committing adultery; looking at a woman with lust in your heart is adultery as well. The President got some of it right but in an unfortunate way, making it sound as though the sexual feeling that is a normal human response is wrong. That is not what the text says. Given the time, the teaching refers specifically to a man looking at a married woman (adultery in this sense involved a married woman) and desiring to have sex with her though she is the wife of another man. The feeling of sexual attraction is not wrong; what is wrong is what we do with the feeling; refusing to let it go, allowing it to become an obsession, being unable to live without completing the act—this is the sin, not the feeling.

The sadness of the way this passage has so often been understood is that it has tended to, if not vilify, at least

taint the normal and creative gift of sexuality. Remember these words attributed to Jesus are written through the lens of past time and of the needs of a community for order. In the living of his life, Jesus seemed to be very comfortable in his own sexuality, comfortable, we would say, in his own body with both men and women. When a presumably beautiful and for certain provocative woman began to wash his feet with expensive perfume, wiping them with her hair, others were scandalized. Jesus was appreciative. To accommodate at least in part our own discomfort with this act, we have understood her action as the symbolic preparation for his coming crucifixion. Perhaps this is true, but in addition I think we can be sure that Jesus found the act pleasurable, an affirming and human act of compassion and devotion. In sharp contrast to what was normative in his culture, Jesus claimed again and again that women were not the source of men's sin; men handled that quite sufficiently on their own. The societal invisibility of women at the time simply made a direct discussion of this unthinkable.

And then we come to divorce. The issue had become important because of the demise of the practice of polygamy. In ancient Hebrew life—we know this in the stories of Abraham and Jacob—men took multiple wives, often explicitly to deal with a problem wife. As the practice of polygamy came to be considered immoral, divorce seemed like a good way of dealing with marital problems—always at the hand of the man. The actions were catastrophic for women in the culture, almost certainly assuring poverty and often resulting in lives of sex trade just to survive. With a flimsy certificate and no real reason for divorce, this could become the reality for any woman. Jesus abhorred the practice and sought to restrict it by saying only in the case of the woman's adultery could a man divorce her. In other gospels Jesus forbids divorce without this caveat, seeming to come down unequivocally against divorce.

I get in trouble every time I say this, but here goes again: all divorce is a tragic story. Though many divorces need to occur—the stories are myriad and you know them already: betrayal, lifeless relationships, abuse—the truth is that, except in the case of blatant pretense or massive denial, every marriage begins with hope and promise. Call me naive, but I truly believe that most couples on their marriage day mean the vows they take. For those to be broken, even when absolutely necessary for the spiritual, human, and sometimes physical survival for one or both of the couple, there is the presence of great tragedy and sadness. Divorce is, therefore, never casual. And the fact that our culture seems to regard it as so deeply saddening. Certainly, there can be not only life but even good and holy life following a divorce, but that does not change the fact that in every divorced person's soul there is a sad chamber of loss and brokenness. Such is to love; such is to be human. Jesus, in sharp contrast to the culture of his time—and I would add in contrast to ours as well—knew that this was serious business that should never to be taken lightly.

Religiosity has almost ruined the notion of righteous living, the extremely pious having given it a connotation of moral superiority and judgment. All of us are the worse for that. The ethic Jesus lived to show us is an ethic of righteousness; we need to reclaim that word, which has almost nothing to do with being pious and almost everything to do with loving. Far from asking us not to be human, Jesus is asking us to be fully human—joyfully, responsibly and lovingly.

The snow has stopped for a while; there is even promise of the sun. And there is hope for us to live new lives—every day there is the choice to live without destructive anger, the choice to seek reconciliation where it can occur, the choice indeed to live with love, one simple act of love at a time.

In the name of God: *Amen.*