

“A KISS for Valentine’s Day”

February 13, 2011

Jesus drives a hard bargain. That’s not what we expect from him. We expect the Old Testament to be the one with the hard bargains; it has all those “thou shalt not’s” and plagues and prophecies of judgment. *Deuteronomy 30:19 (NRSV) I 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.*¹

Moses wasn’t a great motivational speaker; he didn’t see the possibilities; he saw the problems and the punishment.

Jesus, we tell ourselves, wasn’t like that. “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” The Bible tells me, *Matthew 5:17 (NRSV) “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Matthew 5:18 (NRSV) For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished....Matthew 5:20 (NRSV) For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*²

That’s not what we expect from Jesus. That’s a hard bargain. Jesus doesn’t grade on a curve; he grades on a cross. God didn’t send him to lower the standard; God sent Jesus to meet the standard. To be a Christian is to be a disciple of Jesus; disciples who hear these words from the Sermon on the Mount not as impossible ideals but as practical, down to earth guidance that invites us to practice the way of Jesus in the relationships that matter most to us. On this St. Valentine’s Day weekend, we’re going to make it right with a KISS.

♥ MAKE IT RIGHT

President Jimmy Carter famously confessed in *Playboy* that he had lust in his heart. Comics had a field day, but watching various Valentine’s Day commercials (Bad news – the Roman Catholic Church dropped Valentine from its official calendar in 1969 and the Malaysian Imams are warning Muslims not to join in as well) raises the question: aren’t we supposed to?

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

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Sex sells, and we sell sex, so Jesus’ words about “looking at a woman with lust in our heart” seem like they come from another age. Are we supposed to return to the Victorian era when we did not speak of such things? I think it’s a bit too late for that. Are we supposed to believe that sex is shameful and wicked? First, it’s not; it’s a God-given, God-created gift. Second, believing that sex is shameful and wicked surrenders intimacy to the pornographers; it encourages the worst in us rather than bringing out our best. It harms relationships rather than helping them.

Jesus’ teaching about murder, lust, adultery, and divorce all center on the priority of making our relationships right. It’s the Valentine’s Day gift God yearns for us to receive: *if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*³

The alternative is a living hell. “Hell” in the Bible is the word “gehenna,” which refers to the valley south and west of Jerusalem. Gehenna was Jerusalem’s landfill; centuries of trash filled the valley; decomposition produced methane; the fire never went out.

So when Jesus talks about hell, he talking about a life that we’ve chosen to trash. We’ve thrown God’s good gift away.

“Wait a minute, preacher, you’re meddling! It’s not my fault. I see things right. If he wasn’t such a fool, our marriage would be solid! He’s the one who’s made our home a living hell! He’s the one who should make it right!”

“Give me hand, her preacher! I know I’ve made mistakes. She reminds me all the time. If she would just forgive me, then our marriage would be all right. She’s the one making our home a living hell! She’s the one who should make it right!”

Matthew 5:29 (NRSV) If your right eye (not your wrong one, your right one) causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is

³*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mt 5:23-24). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

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better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.⁴

Matthew 5:30 (NRSV) And if your right hand (not your wrong one, your right one) 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.⁵

Berks County has plenty of landfills. Don’t add your home to the list. Make it right. You take the first step. You may be right. You may be wrong. Or you both may be a little right and a little wrong. Someone has to take the first step; as a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, that someone is you. Don’t throw God’s gift away. Make it right.

♥ A “KISS” FOR VALENTINE’S DAY

Meanwhile back at the ranch, some of us are divorced. Some of our parents are divorced. Some of our children are divorced. Are we Gehenna bound?

Yes, we are. And so are the lustful and the “holier-than-thou”, the angry name-callers and the passive aggressive “victims,” the self-righteous judges and the self-serving scoundrels. Yes, we are all Gehenna bound.

Will we stay that way? Will we continue on “the highway to hell,” or will we turn around? That’s the hard bargain Jesus’ is driving, because to turn around, we have to face what we are and what we’ve done.

The deeper issue Jesus is speaking to is the power of shame in our lives. We’ve all done things we’re ashamed of. There are images and memories in our lives that we would rather not look at, but until we do, they continue to hold power over us; they harm our relationships

⁴ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

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and damage our spirits. We’re walking wounded on “the highway to hell.”

Shame lurks in pride’s shadow. Shame insists that “it’s too complicated.” Shame whispers, “they’ll never understand.” Shame condemns, “You’re not strong enough.” Shame promises, “I’ll keep you safe.”

Jesus holds out his hand and says, “Let’s figure this out together. We’ll take it one step at a time. I’ll give you strength and see you through.”

Here’s a KISS for St. Valentine’s Day – Keep it simple, saint.” “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’.” You don’t have to explain. You don’t have to justify. All that does is tie you up in knots. All that does is reinforce shame’s power over you. Keep it simple, saint, and the truth will set you free.

I drove through Gehenna when I was in Israel. It is now a lush valley of flowers and parks. There’s even a baseball diamond and bleachers; it is one of the few existing green spaces around Jerusalem. The only fire in Gehenna is the fire of somebody’s grill. The fire of judgment has been extinguished.

Jesus doesn’t grade on a curve; he doesn’t peddle “cheap grace.” He grades on a cross; that’s the turning point; that is where the law is fulfilled and God’s holy will is perfectly obeyed. The cross is where our sin is condemned as sin; there is no judgment beyond the cross, only forgiveness. The cross is where we can face our shame and be made whole.

Jesus drives a hard bargain, but it’s quite a deal: Face your shame and overcome it. Confess your sin and find forgiveness. You can do this. You can turn your life around. You can make it right. Take it one step at a time; take the hand that Jesus offers you; keep it simple, saint. On the cross, Jesus offers you a KISS for Valentine’s Day. Amen.