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First Congregational Church  
United Church of Christ  
East Hartford, Connecticut

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*Matthew 5:27-32*

When One Is More

(Seventh in series, The Ten Commandments: More Than They May Seem)

*You shall not commit adultery. (Exodus 20:14)*

This morning we are presented another simply stated commandment, *You shall not commit adultery*. For each of the commandments six through nine there are no added explanatory comments and no particular consequences given for disobeying them. *You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.* But as was observed last week, each of these commandments has ramifications which may not be immediately clear.

Jesus offers an expanded understanding of the seventh Commandment in the Sermon on the Mount. *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'* *But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* And after that he underscores the seriousness of the subject by saying that if it is your right eye or hand that causes you to sin either pluck out the eye or cut off the hand. It is better to go through life without one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

Wow!

Three general principles in which Jesus believed (or considering the subject this morning and to have some fun with words, three facts of life) might be discerned from what he says here. First, Jesus thinks it is at least as important to keep the spirit of the law as it is to keep the letter of the law. Second, he thinks that to be spiritually impaired is worse than being physically impaired. And third, he thinks that out-of-control lust results in great suffering.

As significant as sexual fidelity is to a happy and fulfilling marriage Jesus says that adultery involves more than the physical act. As he did in the case of *You shall not murder*, when it comes to adultery Jesus emphasizes the feeling that motivates the behavior. *Whoever looks at a woman with lust commits adultery.* But the question might be asked at this point, did Jesus mean to do away with all lust? If the answer to that is yes, then would we not need to distinguish lust from other sexual desire? Without sexual desire there is no continuing of the human race, no fulfilling of the command to be fruitful and multiply, no experience of what most people might report as the sheer joy of

intimacy within a context of love and commitment. Surely Jesus did not condemn all sexual desire.

I remember going round and round in a group discussion in Seminary one day attempting to distinguish what might be the difference between lust and sexual desire. We did not succeed. One person suggested that lust was sexual desire for anyone other than one's spouse and that it was possible never to have such thoughts and thus to avoid the sin. Most of us looked at him like he was nuts. Another said that lust is just the earthy, physical side of the matter and therefore in holy relationships such as marriage lust has no place. Most of us thought he was nuts too. I think it was the professor who said that maybe the difference between lust and sexual desire is similar to the one between art and pornography as explained by a Supreme Court justice some time ago. The Justice said that he could not explain the difference but he knew it when he saw it. Most of us thought that meant that he did not really know the difference. In short, in that class we were not able to clearly draw a distinction between lust and sexual desire.

Now if you think I am not on the right track here, and you have resolved to the satisfaction of your own mind the difference between lust and sexual desire, good for you. But I think we can understand Jesus about lust here similar to the way we understood his condemnation of anger in the previous Commandment. It was not all anger that he condemned, because Jesus himself became angry sometimes. It was the anger stemming from resentment and jealousy and selfish frustration that can lead to violence that Jesus condemned. In a like sort of way might Jesus only condemn certain kinds of lust, in particular the lust which makes of sexual activity the ultimate measure of masculinity or femininity, or the evidence of power and success in life, or lust when it becomes so all consuming that its satisfaction overrules every other value and others are left suffering in its wake. To harbor that kind of lust is to risk self destruction, or as Jesus put it, the whole body being thrown into hell. Think of King David. Think of Bill Clinton. Think of Tiger Woods.

For Jesus, the potential trouble and pain coming from that kind of lust is so extreme that if the only way to avoid it was to live without an eye or a hand that would be preferable. Now I don't think Jesus actually wants people to physically maim themselves. Certainly most of us would never pluck out an eye or cut off a hand in order to avoid any type of sin although there have been some men down through the ages who have had themselves castrated in order to avoid the consequences of sinful lust. We do not want to miss the point. The matter is an important one. Sinful lust leads to great pain for everyone involved.

One last thing might be considered about Jesus' teaching here. He mentions only men as the carriers of the lust which can lead to adultery although surely the experience is one shared by women as well. But in the society in which Jesus lived the most egregious expression of lust was from men. It was very difficult for women to live a financially secure and socially respectable life if they were not married. The consequences of a divorce for them could be dire. A divorced woman was considered a broken woman and she might spend the rest of her life in poverty. In Jesus' time and in his society, when a

man committed adultery and it led to divorce, in addition to it being a sexual betrayal, it was a social and economic one as well.

All of this judges adultery rather harshly and most of us might say rightly so. That would be our conclusion about the matter based on both Jesus' teaching and our own experience and observation of life. But as destructive as adultery is, and as much pain as it can cause, I do not think it is the unforgivable sin. If the behavior ceases and there is a desire to continue the marriage, then trust, in time, can be restored. And many times it may not be enough simply to condemn the adulterer. A hard examination of the entire relationship might be in order. Was there pain and heartbreak in the relationship which led to the adultery? Was there emotional neglect? Were there frequent verbal abuses and humiliations? Was there sexual withdrawal? I have often wondered if sexual withdrawal of one partner from the other would be a form of adultery in reverse. It certainly is a sexual betrayal. For some couples an honest consideration of such questions may be too difficult and they prefer just to get divorced. Yet an unwillingness to take a hard look at themselves and their relationship may itself be indicative of the problem. In short, adultery might be a result of other sins committed over a long period of time and never acknowledged, in that case adultery being a symptom of a problem as much as the cause of one.

A lot has been said this morning about sexuality run amok. But let us not forget how good a gift from God it is. And sex is from God, is it not? If God is our creator, from where else would sex come? Sometimes it seems to me that we think about sexuality as something which sort of snuck into us when God wasn't looking, something for which we might apologize to God and which God might only tolerate because it is such a big deal to us. A favorite question I like to ask to couples in premarital conversations is, why did God make sex? Isn't that a great question? It is a loaded question to be sure. But if God made sex then it must be good. I really don't know that many people have thought about it. Sometimes couples say that God made sex just for procreation. Come on! Couldn't God have figured out another way for us to reproduce? I doubt that many heterosexual couples have sex only to procreate, to say nothing of same gender couples. Think of this. Human beings are the only animals without a sexual heat cycle. People can have sex anytime, whether pregnancy can be the result or not! God must have like the idea of sex very much!

Really, let's have no left over Victorian prudery in the Christian church which thinks that sexuality is a less than holy experience. Nothing could be further from the truth. Within the context of love and commitment it is not just something which is okay with God, it is something that pleases God. It literally makes love. It brings joy. And when we experience love and joy it is holy and God is happy too!