

You have heard it said



Matthew 5:21-37
Year A Epiphany 6

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

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▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	▲
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	▲
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples	▲
▲	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room	▲
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	▲
▲	Phillip - one of the youngest disciples, always well-meaning and honestly curious, sometimes lacking in confidence	▲

Scene 1

James , Joanna , John , Judas , Peter , Phillip

{Judas gathers John, James, Joanna, and Peter for a talk.}

James *[impatiently and irritably]* So are you going to tell us already?

Judas In a minute. We're almost all here.

John What is it that you're concerned about Judas? Why didn't you want the rabbi to join us?

James *[distastefully]* And why did you want *her* here?

Peter *[good naturedly]* Hey, she's paying the bills!

James I don't care how much she donated. It doesn't buy her a seat at the table.

Joanna *[meekly to Judas]* Maybe I should go. I'll be happy to go.

Judas *[business-like]* No, we need you here. We just have to wait for Phillip now.

James *[incredulously]* Phillip? You tell us you have to discuss an important matter with us, but then you leave out the rabbi and you include a kid and a - donor?

John *[in a calm voice, trying to diffuse the anger in the air]* Peter, do you know what this is about?

Peter All I know is that he wants to me to tell you about something the rabbi told me.

{Phillip enters.}

Phillip Sorry I'm late! It was my turn to do the dishes and I couldn't get out of it without giving away where I had to go, which you told me not to do.

James So can we start now?

Judas Absolutely. Phillip, I want you to tell everybody about the talk you had with the rabbi earlier today.

Phillip Oh, that? Okay. Well, I'm not sure there's that much to tell. I got in a fight with Nathanael and called him an idiot, and the rabbi overheard it and gave me a talking to. And...I guess that was it.

James *[sarcastically]* Wow, Judas. I can see why you were concerned.

Judas Hold on. *[to Phillip]* Tell them exactly what he told you.

Phillip He said being mad at someone was just as bad as murdering them.

Joanna *[mildly]* What? That seems pretty extreme.

James *[brusquely]* The point is that a sin is a sin, no matter what.

Joanna *[genuinely puzzled]* But is anger even a sin? Everybody gets angry from time to time.

James *[angrily]* Look, you shouldn't even be here!

John *[jumping in quickly and calmly, trying to diffuse the situation]* Phillip, are you sure that's exactly what he said? What were his exact words?

Phillip *[thinking]* Um...I'm afraid I can't remember.

Judas Fortunately, I do. I was there. He said, and I quote: "You've heard it said, 'Thou shalt not kill', and 'whoever commits murder will be subject to judgment,' but I say to you that whoever is angry with a brother or sister will also be subject to judgment -"

James Well, there you go! He didn't say it would be the same judgment. Only that both acts are sins that will be judged somehow.

Judas And then he said, "whoever insults a brother or sister will be subject to the council -"

Joanna That doesn't sound too bad, either. An insult can be considered slander, and that *could* be subject to a lawsuit, or at least intervention by a community leader. If that's what "council" meant.

Judas And *then* he said, "whoever calls someone a fool...will be subject to Hell fire!

{A long silence.}

Peter Okay, that's pretty bad.

James No it's not! "Subject to" doesn't mean it's going to happen for sure. Of course someone who calls someone else a fool has a chance of going to Hell. Everybody does!

John I think "subject to" is stronger than that. He used it for everything, including murder. If you murder someone, you don't just have a chance of being judged; it's what ought to happen.

Phillip [*sincerely alarmed*] I didn't realize what he was saying! Am I going to Hell because I called my brother an idiot?

Joanna You most certainly are not!

James [*hostilely*] Are you contradicting the rabbi?

Joanna If that's what he really meant, then I suppose I am.

Judas Well, it *is* what he meant. I was there, and John's reading of it is what I heard in his voice. And it gets worse. He said if you've wronged someone, you should make it right before you go to the temple, which is fine, I have no problem with that, but then he said if you've been accused of something by someone, you should settle with him before you even get to court.

Peter What's wrong with that? I must admit, I'd rather fight any battle myself, but I have a feeling the rabbi wants us to be more peaceful from now on.

Judas But what if you're in the right? What if the accusation is just baseless?

John I'm sure it was implied that the accusation is just.

Judas Oh, it was implied all right. In fact, it was rather aggressively asserted! He said you should settle quickly, because otherwise your accuser might hand you over the judge and have you thrown in prison. In other words, it's just assumed that you're guilty, and your accuser has all the power.

James You're reading too much into the story! I don't know what's gotten into you, but if you want out, just leave! Don't go ginning up a complaint against the rabbi in order to justify yourself.

Phillip *[suddenly worried]* Judas, do you think the new master's going to turn out - like our last one?

Joanna How did your last master turn out?

Phillip He turned out to be crazy.

Peter Say what?

John Who was your former master?

Phillip John, the son of Zachariah.

Joanna You mean the rabbi's cousin? The one who used to baptize people?

Judas *[in horrified surprise]* They're *cousins*?

James *[firmly]* Okay: In the first place, John was not crazy! He was a great prophet of God. And he was the one who said the rabbi would be the Messiah!

{A long silence, as everyone except maybe James starts thinking there might be something to Judas' concerns.}

John *[quietly, trying to get a handle on the situation]* Judas, why don't you tell us what you're getting at.

Judas *[grimly]* Just this: Maybe you can say it's just assumed the accusers claims are just, and he was just giving good advice about how to

handle it when you're in the wrong, but when you take what he said along with everything else, it forms a pattern. It paints a certain picture.

John A picture of what?

Joanna *[jumping in]* A picture of an extremist with no common sense about human nature. Someone who thinks a person could really go through life never getting mad at anybody. *[to Judas]* That's why you wanted me to tell them about *my* talk with the rabbi, isn't it?

Peter Hey, that's my story about the marketplace, too, now that I think about it.

John *[resigned]* I guess we'd better hear them, too, before we discuss this any further.

Judas Go ahead, Peter. You're next up.

Peter Okay, well, my story is that we were in the marketplace the other day, and some women came walking by, and they were - uh...they were..,you know...

Phillip What? What were they?

Peter *[to Joanna in an embarrassed tone]* Pardon me, ma'am. *[to everybody]* They were good looking. And so...I looked.

John And the rabbi said something about that?

Peter He sure did. He said that just looking a woman with - you know, with...pardon me ma'am! with lust in your heart, was the same thing as committing adultery with her! I have to admit, at the time, I felt terrible about myself, but now that I hear you talk -

James You *should* feel terrible about yourself! Leering at women in the street!

Joanna I'm surprised to hear you say that.

James *[insulted]* What do you mean by that? *[to Peter]* Falling for a wicked woman is the worst trap you can fall in. They can lead you to Hell! It's better to be blind rather than fall for that temptation.

Peter That's exactly what the rabbi said! He said if your eye offends you, you should cut it off. And if your right hand offends you, you should cut *it* off. He said it's better to lose one of your members than for your whole body to end up in Hell.

Joanna *[indignantly]* I can't believe this! You think a woman's wicked just because you're attracted to her? And what's this about cutting off one of your "members"? Did he name any other "members" besides your eye and your hand that you should consider cutting off?

Peter No. Like what?

Joanna You don't want to know!

John *[evenly]* It does seem on the extreme side.

James *[argumentatively]* Forbidding lust and adultery is on the extreme side?

Judas No. But thinking a man can go his whole life without lusting for a woman is. And saying that lust will send you to Hell is.

Phillip And telling you to cut off - any part of your body sure is.

{Another silence, as they all ponder this.}

Joanna Well, my story is disturbingly similar. I was talking about some friends of mine that got divorced, and the Rabbi said that anyone who divorced a woman, except for cheating, was basically causing her to commit adultery. And that anyone who married a woman who was divorced like this, would be committing adultery himself.

Peter I don't get it.

Joanna He was basically saying that divorce is not legitimate unless one of the spouses cheats on the other. Though now that I think about it, he only ever talked about the woman cheating. So maybe he doesn't feel as strongly about the man running around.

James *[impatiently]* Okay, for one last time, I'm going to ask: what's wrong with that? Are you in *favor* of divorce?

Joanna Nobody's *for* it, but sometimes it's the lesser evil. Suppose you were a woman living with a wife beater. Would it really be better to stay in that marriage than to be divorced? There are people I know whose divorce was the only wise thing they ever did together.

Judas That may be how you elites carry on in your ivory palaces, but normal people marry for life. They get married and have children and don't quit on each other when problems come up, and then their children grow up to do the same!

- Joanna** That certainly serves the needs of the society well, but what about the needs of the person?
- John** *[again trying to diffuse the situation with a mild question]* Did the rabbi say anything else?
- Joanna** Well, we talked about marriage vows, and vows in general, and he said that people shouldn't make vows or sign contracts at all, because their word ought to be enough.
- Phillip** That sounds reasonable enough.
- Joanna** It does. But then he concluded by saying that anything beyond our simple word comes from the devil.
- {Another long silence.}*
- Judas** So you see? I think we're dealing with a fanatic here. Anger is just as bad as murder. Lust or divorce are just as bad as adultery. Any kind of formal promise is of the devil. It's extremism at its worst.
- James** *[rising to a stirring and noble defense of Jesus]* It's righteousness at its best! I don't know about you, but I expect my Messiah to be better than I am. I expect him to make moral demands of me that are almost impossible to meet! I expect him to be a *spiritual* Messiah as well as political, to not only save us from the Romans, but save us from our sins! And if you thought otherwise, it's probably best that you leave us, because we don't need you.
- John** James, no one's talking about leaving him...are we?
- {A final silence while everyone thinks over their answers.}*
- Peter** *[firmly]* I said I would stick with him, and I intend to do it. Period.
- Joanna** Mary adores him. And I must admit, he's given me more to think about since I joined up than all the banquet guests Chuza and I ever invited to speak to our little dinner party group. I'll stay. For now. But I won't keep my mouth shut if he says anything else I disagree with.
- John** I'll stay, too. *[to Phillip, Peter, and Joanna]* I'm not doubting your accounts - *[to Judas]* or your reading of them. But I just think - I *know* there's more to him than that. And I know it will come out.

Phillip I have no idea what to do! I already left one Messiah to follow this new one. I don't know if I could do this again. *[after a pause, to Judas]* I'll leave it up to you. If you go, I'll go with you. If you stay, I'll stay.

Judas I'll stay, for the time being. If it takes a religious fanatic to lead us to freedom, then so be it. It's the fight that's the important thing to me. As long as he doesn't fail us on that score, I'm with him.

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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