

The Spirit of the Law
Matthew 5:21-37

In a New Jersey town there's a playground with two fences, one inside the other. The gate of the outer fence has a typical latching handle. The gate of the second fence has a different type of latch, higher on the gate, just out of the reach of small children. The message is clear: Children must be accompanied by an adult in order to enter or exit the playground.

The double-fence system creates a second layer of safety to protect vulnerable young lives. Other playgrounds might simply have a sign stating that all children must be accompanied by an adult, but the builders or caretakers for this particular playground must have been very afraid that children might enter or exit without an adult. There must have been some concern that children would get hurt.

Depending on how you approach it, our text this week can be viewed as having a similar double-gate quality. In some circles, it is called "building a fence around the Torah." This is a way of creating a culture of accountability where laws are created to prevent people from coming anywhere close to breaking a commandment or one of the laws in the Torah.

Each of the rules Jesus mentioned in the text today was previously stated in the Old Testament. And if we take his expansions on them as new restrictions, they make it less likely that anyone will come close to breaking one of them, at least according to the letter of the original laws. In order to prevent someone from even thinking about murder, there is a warning against anger. To discourage someone from committing adultery, there is a warning against lust. Upon divorce, there should be a certification of the end of the relationship so there is no risk of adultery. Every oath should be kept, or one risks equivalence with “the evil one.”

If understood as new restrictions, Jesus’ words become additional “fences” around existing Old Testament rules, having consequences that seem intended to strike fear in the hearts of potential offenders. Who would want to risk the loss of a limb? Who would want to be thrown into prison or live eternity in hell? Or be equated with “the evil one”? These are heavy penalties for even coming close to breaking a commandment. In this line of thinking, people will fear the punishment so much that they will be discouraged from the crime.

Are all fences built because of fear? We build fences around swimming pools because we are afraid that children and pets might drown. We build fences around our yards out of fear that our property might be encroached upon.

Fear is one of the most basic and innate human emotions. It is an adaptive response intended to keep us safe. When there is a perception of danger, your body physically responds without you even having to think about it. Some call this the fight-or-flight-or-freeze response. When you feel fear, you may notice that your breathing quickens, your pulse jumps up, you sweat, your muscles tense, and maybe you even feel your blood sugar levels change. You feel this fear when you narrowly avoid a car accident or when you anticipate a difficult conversation.

Fear can be a good thing. It keeps us safe. Fear prevents us from doing dangerous things and gives us the energy to escape life-threatening circumstances. Fear can also be manipulated to change our thought patterns and prevent us from thinking rationally and logically. Fear seeks safety, and that need for safety can be exploited by someone or by groups of people who may outwardly seem safe, but who use fear to manipulate feelings, emotions, thoughts or actions in a particular direction.

Fear is tremendously useful, adaptive and important. It can also be dangerous and life-threatening and can create vulnerabilities. When fear causes us to build walls and fences because our neighbors might possibly be dangerous, without any prior event or circumstance to indicate that they are in fact dangerous, then our fear has provoked an irrational and unnecessary response.

If our fear of adultery gives us permission to take literally Jesus' words about plucking out a lustful eye — words that he intended only metaphorically — our fear has taken us to irrational places. So, it's possible to read this scripture as Jesus building a fence around the Torah, adding rules and restrictions so we don't come even close to murdering or committing adultery or divorce or breaking an oath. That fence is fortified with fear: prison time, hell, cutting off body parts, the evil one. These are terrifying consequences.

But that's not the only possible way to understand Jesus' words here, and almost certainly not how he wanted them to be heard. More likely, he intended us to see beyond the specifics of the laws to the spirit behind them. Jesus isn't saying, "Don't even get angry with someone because that might move you to break the law against murder."

He's saying that acting in anger toward someone is the equivalent of murder, when the "law" you follow is the kingdom-of-God law of love.

With that understanding, one of the takeaways from Jesus' interpretation of the laws is that they are examples of what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves. The spirit of these laws rules against treating any person as someone you have the right to control. Your anger should not take

someone's life. Your lust should not take someone's body. Your divorce should not prevent someone from having relationships. You cannot own people. You cannot own their bodies or their minds or their spirits or their emotions.

We can read the text without hearing it as providing new grounds for guilt and new reasons to fear over rules that have been broken or sins that have been committed. We can read Jesus' words in this text and see the fence that it builds not as one of fear but as one of love. As such, it urges us to protect the autonomy of our neighbors so that each person can live in a healthy community without their bodies, minds or spirits being coveted or controlled or hurt by anyone else.

In other words, Jesus builds a spirit-fence around these laws that provokes love, acceptance and freedom, while also protecting relationships from harm — and he does it without invoking fear.

He urges us to not murder, to not commit adultery, to make divorce legally binding and to keep our word, with love for neighbor being the motivation.

If you feel skeptical, maybe it is because something of this nature has not really been tried in our modern society. We have rules and consequences — especially negative ones — for nearly everything. We have built whole programs and campaigns around negative consequences for infractions of the

rules. Even schools that tout “positive reinforcement” for good behavior in the classroom also have lists of negative consequences when rules are broken.

On the whole, the gospel urges us to break free from our skepticism and take risks on the basis of radical love. Today’s gospel passage, even with its negative rhetorical flourishes, does what Jesus says, a few verses back, that he came to do: He has not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them.

To do that, he urges us to look for the spirit behind the letter of the law.

And the spirit is always love.