

Sermon for Sunday,  
February 16, 2020  
by  
Reverend Nathan  
Erdman

[0:07] Well, you might not think about it a lot, but you know there's a lot of rules at the zoo, especially when it comes to the animals

[laughter]: Don't touch  
the animals, don't feed  
the animals, don't rap  
on the glass, don't tease  
the animals, don't get  
into the exhibit and

play with the animals  
[laughter]. And with  
some animals, the zoos  
pretty much trust us to  
keep the rules. For  
instance, the Zoo

America at Hershey  
Park, if you just want  
to climb over the rails  
and frolic around with  
the prairie dogs, there's  
really not a whole lot

stopping you. But,  
when it comes to the  
National Zoo and the  
lions, it doesn't seem  
like they fully trust  
visitors to follow the

rules [laughter]; yeah,  
because the stakes are  
so much higher than  
the stray prairie dog  
nippin' at your heels.  
So, if you want to share

your hot dog with a  
lion, you'd better have  
a cannon for an arm,  
because they keep  
those lions far away. I  
mean if you want to

hop in with the lions  
for a cuddle, you've  
*really* got to want it  
[laughter]. They're up  
there on a hill, there's a  
big old moat and, in

front of that, a pretty imposing fence. The zoo has put a fence around those lions because this is serious—this is a life-

and-death matter for  
humans and lions  
alike—so they take  
extra precautions to  
make sure that people

follow these really  
important rules.

[1:40] Now, this idea  
of taking extra  
precautions to ensure

following important  
rules and  
commandments is front  
and center in today's  
gospel. You know, it  
was a common practice

in ancient Jewish  
teaching to do what is  
called “building a  
fence” around the law.  
The idea is to take  
additional precautions

beyond what is called  
for in a commandment  
to make extra sure that  
you don't break it. And  
that is exactly what  
Jesus is doing here in

this section of the  
Sermon on the Mount.

[2:14] So, for instance,  
the best way to steer  
clear of committing

violence or murder  
against another human  
being, is to work to not  
harbor hate in your  
heart in the first place.  
Or, the best way to

ensure you are not  
going to commit  
adultery, is to refrain  
from letting those  
flickers of attraction for  
someone else who is

not your spouse, to then  
develop into more  
lustful thoughts or  
intricate fantasies.

Want to guard against  
swearing false oaths?

Well then, how about just not swearing any oaths at all! You want to make sure you are not divorcing for the wrong reason? Then,

don't divorce except  
for unfaithfulness.

[2:57] Now, before we  
go further, I do want to  
say a few things about

Jesus's prohibition  
against divorce. *First,*  
does this mean that  
Jesus is saying that  
someone needs to stay  
in an abusive

relationship? No, no,  
and no! God wants  
what's best for us.

Jesus wants what's best  
for us. No one has to  
stay in a marriage that

is physically or  
emotionally abusive.

*Second*, does this mean  
that those who have  
suffered a divorce  
should be cast off by

the church? No, no,  
and no! In the  
Christian life there is  
healing. There is  
forgiveness. There are  
fresh starts. No one is

beyond God's love!  
So, regardless of your  
relationship status now,  
or relationships you  
had in the past, or  
relationship difficulties

you may be facing right  
now, you are welcome  
here at Church! We  
want you here at  
Church! Know that  
God loves you and

wants to be a part of  
your life.

[4:19] Okay, now that  
we have covered that,  
we can get back to

Jesus talking about  
murder and adultery.  
[Lots of laughter.] He  
is getting pretty intense  
in his teaching here  
today, isn't he? Not

enough not to cheat—  
don't be lustful. Not  
enough not to kill  
somebody—don't hate.  
And then he says,  
“Gouge out your eyes.”

“Cut off your hand.”

Happy Valentine’s Day!

[Sustained laughter]

[4:52] Jesus, what’s  
with all the gore?

Whatever happened to  
all those nice things  
you say, like, “Do unto  
others,” and “Love  
your neighbor as  
yourself”?

[5:08] Yes, actually  
maybe today's passage  
is a good one for  
Valentine's weekend  
because, in truth, it  
actually tells us a lot

about love. It shows us that Jesus loves us so much that he goes to great lengths to get our attention. That's the reason for the gory

imagery. Of course, it is not meant to be taken literally; it's to get our *attention*. It's to help us realize that hate, that murder, that lust,

adultery, divorce—  
these are serious things.  
You know, we are long  
past prairie dogs  
nippin' at our heels.  
We are in the lions' den

now. So, Jesus goes to great lengths to try to protect us—warning us about about the pain that comes from that hate, and violence, and

murder, and adultery,  
and divorce. And he  
does so because he  
loves us!

[6:08] You see, all these rules that God gives us, they are not there to repress us. They aren't to make sure we don't have a

good time. They are there to help us flourish as human beings; to help us be the people that God created us to be. You know, really

what we hear from  
Jesus today is all about  
being in right  
relationships—right  
relationship with God  
and right relationship

with one another. Jesus  
is calling you to live  
your love as an *action*,  
not just a feeling.  
Because you probably  
don't have any more

fuzzy or loving feelings  
for those who have hurt  
you, or for those who  
you really disagree  
with a lot. But you  
don't have to give in to

hate. You can do the hard work of becoming a person of forgiveness. And, you know, in this political climate, it's a good idea to put a

check on anger, and resist that urge to say, “You fool!” to those on the other side of the aisle. And, you know, marriage vows, too.

They aren't about  
warm, fuzzy feelings.  
No one promises in an  
Episcopal marriage  
service to be a swoony  
romantic all the time, "I

love you,” “No, I love  
*you* more,” “No, no, I  
love you *more*.”

[Laughter] No! There  
is no promise that  
things will *always* be

all happy and swoony  
and hunky-dory.

Actually, the vows  
assume that this *won't*  
always be the case: For  
richer, for poorer; for

better, for worse; in  
sickness, in health.  
Love here, and in  
marriage, too, is about  
loving *action*—caring,  
forgiving, faithfulness,

and patience for and  
with one another—with  
the help of God. And  
this, of course, gives us  
a glimpse. It is a sign  
pointing to the sort of

love that Jesus has for us—a love that is caring, forgiving, and faithful; a love that endures all things, believes all things,

hopes all things; a love  
that never ends; a love  
that endures even death  
on a cross, and  
transforms that death  
into resurrection life.

So, don't buy into those  
lies that speak of love  
as just some warm,  
fuzzy feelings. True  
love, the love of God in  
Christ for each and

every one of you, the  
love that each Christian  
is called to strive to  
have for one another,  
goes much, much  
deeper. Christian love

isn't just felt, it is *lived*!  
It is lived in choosing  
forgiveness over anger.  
It is lived in  
recognizing the full  
dignity of every human

being. It is lived in honoring the promises made in our relationships, and it is lived in choosing generosity over greed,

and caring for the sick  
and the hungry and the  
poor. And, it is lived in  
showing our love of  
God in worship! In  
action! In prayer! In

praise! In song! And,  
in partaking of the  
Sacraments. Yes,  
putting out your hands  
to receive the body and  
blood of Jesus is a

loving act. It is an act that says, “Yes, I love you, Lord Christ! Yes, I am here, and I want your very presence in my life!” Living a life

of true Christian faith,  
love, and devotion is so  
important!

[10:12] So, build that  
fence. Build that fence

around all that gets  
between you and living  
out Christ's call to love  
God, and to love  
others. Build that fence  
around all those things

that tempt you away  
from being the best  
loving person that you  
can be—that person  
that God created you to  
be. Whatever that is,

gouge that out, cut it  
off.

[10:38] Don't let those  
lions get you!

Amen!