

Matthew 5:21-37

I am an old movie fan and often watch Turner Classic Movies. This is there 31 days of Oscar in which they celebrate former Oscar winning films

Recently, one of my favorites was on, Peyton Place. The movie is based on ***Peyton Place*** a 1956 novel by [Grace Metalious](#). The novel describes how three women are forced to come to terms with their identity, both as women and as sexual beings, in a small, conservative, gossipy New England town, with recurring themes of hypocrisy, social inequities and [class privilege](#) in a tale that includes incest, abortion, adultery, lust and murder. It sold 60,000

copies within the first ten days of its release and remained on *The New York Times* [best seller list](#) for 59 weeks.

It was an extremely controversial novel in its day. Was made into a movie in 1957 and spawned a franchise that lasted for several decades. The books start in 1937 and goes thru WWII. Towns throughout New England wondered If they were the ones that made up the community of Peyton Place. A term that has become part of the lexicon of the American language to mean any small town or group to hold scandalous secrets.

Teen age kids would hide the copies that they were reading from their parents or find their parents copies and read it when they were not around. It was considered beyond risqué for its day. Metalious didn't like the movie

as she thought they tamed it down too much and made it a bit of a soap opera.

Of course, after reading today's Gospel we realize that what the authoress of Peyton Place wrote was nothing new to the human race. Today's Gospel is of course about hypocrisy, social inequities, class privilege, murder, adultery and lust. And by the brisk sales of the novel and the number of weeks on the best sellers list we as humans have an appetite at times for the salacious. Or if not for the salacious for the human condition. Whether a small New England town or part of Matthews gospels, or are own lives.

Of course, today's Gospels is one of those we never like to preach on. This appears to be one of the times that Christ is PO'd with us and warns us to tear out an eye or take off your right hand. I am not sure what that means if you are left-handed. And some countries still take these rules literally. The best place to buy high end jewelry is in Saudi Arabi. As if the religious police catch a jeweler cheating a customer they still cut off their hands.

End of course last Sunday at the annual meeting we discussed several baptismal promises one of which was: Persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord.

From the Gospel of Matthew written between AD 70 to 90. To Peyton Place written in 1956 to where we are today. We are still dealing with finding the moral compass to live our lives. A topic that seems more relevant today than ever.

Which leads me to ask myself what is my moral compass?

What is the moral compass of a society and what is a moral compass of a congregation?

Part of me learned the ten commandments by rote at a young age. I am not sure I could quote them as perfectly today as I did then. And as a child of 7 or 8 they seemed ominous and daunting. I had a better sense of what and who the devil was then. I used them as a guideline of what sins to confess in

confession. Though at that age I am pretty sure I could pass over adultery pretty well. But swearing not so much or having it out with a sibling and maybe not having forgiven them as quickly as I should were pretty easy to confess.

But as an adult the commandments feel a bit more complex. And as I am writing this I am questioning if at one point in my life I may have had an adulterous affair. They were separated but not yet divorced but were in the process. Did that make me leave my moral compass behind. By that point in my life I had stopped going to confession and for the most part wasn't doing too much with church either. It wasn't as easy to use the commandments as a check list. Did I have to take out an eye or cut off my hand?

In certain areas of my life I attempt to use the Golden Rule. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Works most of the time. But sometimes you have to muster up a lot of courage to live up to that one as well. Especially if I am the one to have made the mistake and have to admit to it. Most of the time I beat myself up worse than the offended party ever will. And sometimes people treat you pretty bad does that mean the proper moral code is an eye for an eye?

And some time I rely on the voice of others when dealing with a question of what would be the right moral decision to make.

Of course, you have to trust that your mentors have some moral code of their own. Fortunately, I have a nice range of

mentors in my life who I can count on. And sometimes they are people who may not even be a mentor but in a comment or a conversation will give you the answer you have been looking for out of the blue.

Of course, in society as well as myself we have the laws of the land that tell us what will happen to us if we sin against societal law. If we commit murder there are degrees to which we can commit it from murder in the first degree to man slaughter. If we steal what are the consequences, how to handle a divorce etc. We rely on the counsel of a good attorneys to help us find our way through these laws and to help us make proper decisions or cases. Fortunately, we have attorneys in this congregation with good moral compasses. But not all attorneys

as with any profession are created equal in their capabilities. And the laws of the land can change with the prevailing winds of the political season of a City, State or Nation or judges of a court system. Our sources of checking our societal moral compass in my youth were NBC, CBS, ABC if the weather and the aerial were just right Iowa Public Television, the local radio station and in our family the Des Moines Register. The priest on Sunday and the movie ratings in the church bulletin given by whatever catholic group had the authority to rate them. I am sure that Peyton Place either book or movie were strictly off limits. Peyton Place was probably nothing compared to what was happening in a lot of those small-town parishes. I wonder why it is we are interested in the human condition the sensational aspects of life but only from a distance. I don't always have the courage to look closer into the cause and

effect of why they happen. If it is not affecting me personally why bother.

And into today's worlds there are so many sources that are willing to confirm whatever moral compass you want to follow whether it agrees with mine or not.

In my youth I trusted the moral compass of the adults in my life, family members, school officials, police, the political leaders, and my religious leaders. As an adult that is much more difficult to do. And for many young people they were totally the wrong people to trust. As one friend told me once I am not sure why my uncle went for me when I was young. My brother who was only a year older was so much better looking.

As an Episcopal church we are run by the canons of the church. The laws of the church that cover almost everything a church can do. They are supposed to be the moral compass of the church. But over time they can change as well. Most of the time for the good but not always. And historically there would have been a few canons in the day that today we would consider to be possibly evil. Women clergy, LGBT rights are still tearing some denominations apart.

Which leads to the question of what is the new moral compass for people who no longer believe or go to church on a Sunday. What do they use as a moral compass? Some people would say that of course taking Christianity out of schools and government has led to the decay of the nation and of the

nation's sense of right and wrong. That we are supposed to be a Christian Nation. But in doing my research I have come across a new term that I am sure to use again. The ala carte Christian. Christians who pick and choose what aspects of Christianity that fit their prevailing desires to what they believe to be right and or wrong. Of course, many of them profess to have a one on one connection to the divine. Does the church have a menu to pick and choose what fits your needs for today? Oh, I am going to sin lite today...I will have a couple of venial sins hold the sour cream and butter, oh and after yesterday how about an extra large order of forgiveness and maybe some sacrificial wine to wash that down with. Do you have anything in a robust red?

And as much as last week we admitted that we didn't much like to talk about evil and the devil. I also think we don't much like to talk about our souls either. But as much as it may be hard for us to talk about the intangibles of not easy to see but things we all know we have witnessed. We have all at some point witnessed evil and at the other end of the spectrum we have all at some point have witnessed the soul as well.

Today's Gospel is Jesus in our face about our sense of a moral compass. It is down and dirty and tough to swallow. And thought provoking. But isn't that life every day. We love the days that are like an idyllic picturesque New England town. But life is tough, not easy and most time like that of Peyton Place. And though there are many ways we guide our sense of right

and wrong. It is ultimately to remember to connect our souls to the divine for the ultimate guidelines. Of not just this world but more importantly for the next.

It is not just what would Jesus do but what would Jesus do together with us, and our souls connected to him. In a world where we are bombarded with so many ways to think, feel, believe in what is right or wrong. How do we find time to connect our souls back to him and to have him guide or life our moral compass?

We asked those some of these questions last week. How to we continue to ask these questions in not only in the life of this congregation but our own lives as well? How does your soul

guide you in a closer connection to God and to live a life of service, in all of the difficulties of your day? It is not always easy to work to be a follower of Christ and the church and to live in this world that is sloppy and tough and difficult. But we are blessed to be able to share this journey together to do the hard work together. And hopefully discover Christ and the Christ in each of us along the way and still live a life that has some sense of a moral compass.

And all of Gods Children say, Amen