

Epiphany 6 - Year A

Today's gospel is still part of Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount" and follows immediately after the passage we heard last Sunday. You may or may not have noticed that I glided right over the end section of last week's Gospel in my homily. I did that because I knew what was coming this week, and wanted us to hear the two sections together.

Last week we heard this: Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to *abolish* but to *fulfill*. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

When we read that passage together at our clergy meeting with the bishop a couple of weeks ago, one of the priests said that this passage always troubles her. "I mean," she said, "Here I am, wearing a sweater woven from two different fabrics" – something prohibited in both Deuteronomy and Leviticus! Jesus is not urging us to literalism here. No, the real message is in the last line: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." That sounds impossible if we define righteousness in terms of keeping every bit of the law, because the scribes and Pharisees had that down. But remember the other definition of righteousness – being your right self, your true self. Unless your sense of rightness goes beyond keeping the *letter* of the law, you will never enter or understand or live in the Way of God.

And now we pick up with what we heard this morning: “Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment;” And then Jesus goes on with more “You have heard it said... but what I say to you is...”

We need to hear these two passages *together*, because otherwise we might think that Jesus is saying the old law does not apply, or that Jesus is coming up with *new* laws. But the truth is in the passage from last week. Jesus has not come to *abolish* the law or prophets, but to *fulfill* them. As Eric Barreto from Princeton and Joy J. Moore from Luther Seminary put it, Jesus is not advocating *replacement* of the law and prophets, but *intensification*.

As I’ve said many times before, Jesus is always inviting us beyond where we are. Here, he is calling us *beyond* merely following the words of the law, and into the *spirit* of the law. He is saying, “Pay attention to what God said, yes – but pay more attention to what God *meant*.” And in today’s Gospel, he tells us what that looks like.

Jesus says that the law prohibiting murder was not just about the violence of taking a physical life, but also about the violence in our *words* with one another, about our *attitudes toward* one another, about how we *see* one another. Adultery is not just an action, but a *way of seeing* that says one person’s desires in the moment are more important than any relationship. That lustful glance is about the fact that I *see* another, in that moment, as the fulfillment of my *own* desire, the *object* of my own wants – not as a person.

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all... Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.” When I investigate complaints as part of my Adult Foster Care Licensing job with the state, I interview lots of people, alleged to have done lots of not-good things. Part of my job is to sort out the truth in a situation, what really happened. I can tell you that when someone says, “I swear I would never say something like that!” a little alarm on my “falsehood” detector goes off.

But United Methodist Pastor Rachel May gave me a new insight into what she calls the “4th teaching” in today’s Gospel. She has this to say:

“Way back when, to swear was to associate God with what one wanted others to do or to believe about the one doing the swearing. So if I wanted you to buy my camel, I might swear that the camel was X numbers of years old and that he was a real trooper about carrying this amount of weight. With God as my witness, I might say this camel is a thoroughbred. But here’s the thing, and it’s an important thing. The “swear” took on falsehood not at the point at which I failed to tell the truth about the age of the camel and the size of the load it can carry – though that was certainly unlawful– but at the point when I told you what I told you for personal gain. The falsehood seeped in when I put my need for you to see me as the offeror of a good thing over and above the wellbeing of both the camel and you the new owner.”

We are all too familiar with this type of false swearing. We have become accustomed to false statements made publicly that can – also publicly – be shown to be false – but that seems no longer to matter. We have even watched as people publicly swear to do something that they have – also publicly – said they have no intention of doing. And that does not seem to matter. But Jesus, here in this Gospel passage, says it *does* matter. The false swearing comes in – whether I swear by heaven or Jerusalem or not – when I put my need for you to see me as the offeror of a good thing over and above the wellbeing of everything and everyone else.

We wear clothing made from mixed fibers all the time. We do not whip or stone people to death for eating pork – which is another part of the Torah. And lying – bearing false witness – falsely swearing – is so common that it has become normal. So now we no longer have even the pretense of keeping the letter of the law – we are in grave danger of losing the *spirit* of the law. We are losing the *relationships* that the law was meant to preserve. Catholic priest Michael Renninger says we must learn to hear and follow what God meant, instead of manipulating ancient words to rationalize modern unfaithfulness.

Our salvation, our being able to be part of the kingdom of God, our “righteousness” depends on the rightness of our relationships – with God and with one another.

I do not think it is a stretch to say that each of the “teachings” we have in today’s Gospel are about relationships, about choosing to work at relationships, about choosing the welfare of the other over my own self-interest, about how to deal with the conflict that arises when our interests do not coincide.

In 1939, Time magazine named two most influential women in America: Eleanor Roosevelt, and Dorothy Thompson. Thompson was the first American journalist to be expelled from Nazi Germany, and had this to say about going *beyond*:

“Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict -- alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence.”

This past week, I had what you might call a run-in with my state job boss. She brought to my attention some paperwork I had not completed by the time frames given in policy. We generally have a decent relationship, but she shifted into supervisorial mode, almost into punitive mode. And I did not respond well. When I saw she had left her laptop screen unlocked when she went to lunch, I left a note saying, “As my boss once told me, be sure to lock your screen for security.” After stewing for a while longer, I realized I did not want to stay or dwell in, or feed my current state of mind and heart. So, when she returned from lunch, I was able to tell her that my passive-aggressive response to her critique of my work was not how I would choose to leave things, but that I also hoped she might find different ways to approach people when she had just criticism to offer. Talking to another – even and perhaps especially another with whom we might disagree – is such a creative alternative to letting wounds fester!

The bottom line? Jesus is inviting us beyond thinking that our righteousness depends on keeping the letter of the law or the deadlines in policy – into knowing that God calls us into right *relationship* – with God and with one another. Let us hear in both Jesus and Moses the invitation of God: “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God.”

- [Deuteronomy 30:15-20](#) [1 Corinthians 3:1-9](#) [Matthew 5:21-37](#) [Psalm 119:1-8](#)