

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Year A - 12/2/2017

Deuteronomy 10:12-22
Psalm 119:1-8
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-27

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Let me start today by saying this: we do ourselves, and more importantly we do Jesus a great dis-service if we read today's Gospels as somehow a series of injunctions or prohibitions to be religiously avoided.

I was preaching a little sermon on Thursday at Chomley House, one of the Aged Care facilities that we regularly visit for communion services. And for the service I used our Gospel passage from 2 weeks ago - the Beatitudes. I pointed out to those present that these are the first publically recorded words of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. And that if Jesus was a politician we might read the Beatitudes as a sort of manifesto - a public affirmation which says "this is what I stand for".

And of course, what is striking about Jesus' manifesto is that it focusses not on the rich or the powerful (those who might have the most influence or the biggest vote!) but instead extends blessing and hope to the poor, the meek, the lost, and the lonely. What Jesus is all about, it seems, is offering full and abundant life to those whose lives are presently somehow diminished by their current predicament or circumstance.

What we need to remember about today's Gospel passage is that it is a continuation of the same sermon which began with those beautiful beatitudes. Our lectionary spreads the whole chapter over a number of weeks, but everything that Jesus says subsequently must be held and interpreted in the light of his opening words. Seen in that context, then, we must look beyond the simple commands "You shall not murder", or "You shall not commit adultery," and understand what Jesus desires for his listeners.

Jesus speaks of judgment for those who hold a grudge with their brother or sister. But rather than merely focusing on this specific example, we should instead heed the warning of Jesus about unresolved anger between humanity and his call for a concrete act of reconciliation.

Jesus speaks about adultery and divorce. In both instances, however, it is more than just a simple case of “don’t do this”! Rather, what he is pointing towards is a relationship of wholeness between males and females, in all situations.

In his admonition regarding swearing false oaths, Jesus pleads for simple, unabashed honesty in the full range of human relationships. One’s “yes” is to mean “yes” and one’s “no” to mean “no.” Truthfulness is to become characteristic of the life lived under the rule of God.

In each of these scenarios Jesus is calling for an entirely new way of viewing human relationships. Behind the prohibitions on which we sometimes focus lies the vision of a restored humanity. Beyond the negative lies the key to choosing life - to saying “yes” to full and wholesome life.

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus insists that the failure to follow the Law of God does more than just upset the good order of society. Rather this is about the way God wants us to live, and the desire of God for us to have full and abundant life. And it is this life that is threatened whenever anger and judgment and insult reign.

Life is threatened when women are objectified, merely fulfillment of sexual desire or the carrying on the family name. Women, Jesus insists, are not culture’s for the taking. So life is threatened when women are consistently reduced, even discarded, based on their capacity to satisfy privileged and patriarchal needs and their capacity to bear children.

Life is threatened when you do not follow through with promises you make. Because your failure to keep the promise makes the one who has been betrayed somehow impoverished; their worth is demeaned.

In other words, Jesus is saying that interpreting the law is far more complex than we often make it out to be. And if our interpretations of the law lead to death -- the silencing of voices, the discounting of the personhood of the other, the disrespect and demeaning of entire groups of people, the labeling (which is a nice way to say calling names) thereby putting people in their place -- then we have to think long and hard about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Clearly, then, our ability to follow Jesus as faithful disciples means much less about simply following the commands, the rules. In fact it means much more, I think, about *bending* those rules when the situation dictates that the worth of another is in jeopardy. Which makes a mockery of the way in which the church throughout history, and even today clings, so often, to dogma and tradition. Not that dogma and tradition are necessarily bad - but when they are held up as the **only way** at the expense of the sort of people Jesus pronounced as blessed, then something is clearly wrong.

If “choose life” was the test case for what we did and said, the canonical marker, if you will for disciple-speak, we may pause before we lash out in anger and fear. We might reconsider simply what the church has always done or said in new and contemporary situations of human distress. We might take a moment before we label someone pro-life, pro-choice, pro-abortionist, (or anti all of those things).

We might stop and think, is what I am about to say and what I am about to do something that would be recognizable as life-giving, life- upholding, life-empowering? The message today seems to me to be this: “*Doing the right thing* is much more important than *doing the thing right* (just following the rules)”.

As we consider this life-giving way of Jesus, let me finish with these wonderful words from the American Theologian, Jeremy Younger, who writes this in his commentary of the passage of today:

“Worship with all your heart. Pray genuinely. Love your church. Believe that God loves you. Remember the stories of Jesus. See Christ in the people around you. Share God’s love with someone who has forgotten it. Delight in God’s good gifts. See that all of life is holy. Open your heart to the Spirit. Search for something deeper and better than your own comfort. Live in the joy beneath it all. Let God make your life wonderful.”

In the name of God. Amen.