

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany - Year A

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 119:1-8

I Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

02/16/2020

Gospel

The holy Gospel according to St. Matthew: *(congregation may be seated)*

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 21“‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. 27“‘You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29If your right

eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. 31“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. 33“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.’ 34But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tough Choices

Good morning! Every seminary student is required to do what is called a cross cultural event. They’re offered in January, between the fall and spring semester. Some of my friends went to a Native American reservation to help at a school. Others basically took a vacation in the Holy Land for two weeks. My choice wasn’t so glamorous. I went to Haiti for a mission trip. I went in my second year of seminary, because during my first

J-term (as it's called) I was busy getting married. Which, I argued, should have qualified for a cross cultural experience, but I went with Dr. Dan Bell, the theology and ethics professor at the time. We worked helping to rebuild a church that had been destroyed in the earthquake and were in a small city about an hour or two north of Port-au-Prince. This was the first trip that Dr. Bell had led to Haiti. He usually went to El Salvador every year, but decided to offset that trip every other year with the trip to Haiti. When asked why he made the change, he told the story of how he was in El Salvador when the earthquake hit Haiti, and the whole community stopped and prayed for them. And when El Salvador starts to pray for a community, you know they have it bad.

One day after a particularly heavy and tiring amount of work it was just the two of us washing up at a communal sink before dinner. We would basically dunk our heads under the water and wash our arms and hands and call it a day. I think we were commiserating over how we felt, which surprised me, because Dr. Bell was known for his mission trip work. So, I asked him "Why do you do all these mission trips if you don't enjoy them?", "Because," he answered, "if I don't take you students nobody else will."

For Dr. Bell it wasn't about what he really thought about the mission work, it was what he believed all Christians were called to do. So regardless of the pain, regardless of the cost, he was going to keep taking students to other countries to witness Christ's work for as long as he was a teacher. I had always really liked Dr. Bell, but it was at that moment that I made up my mind that this was my favorite professor. I have always admired the ability I saw evident in him to be able to be open and honest about God's call, even when we may want to ignore it.

Which brings us to our Gospel lesson today, because it too is one that would be a whole lot easier if we just covered our ears and pretended that Jesus never said it. What we heard today was part of what Douglas R. A. Hare calls the “Six Antitheses.”¹ Today we get anger, lust, divorce, and oaths. The other two are nonviolent resistance and the always popular love for enemies. We pick up this text directly following last week’s announcement that Jesus has come “*not to abolish [the law], but to fulfill.*”² Hare also argues that “*what is presented in this passage is not a new law but a call to a new way of life.*”³ and that “*The antitheses are therefore to be seen as presenting Jesus’ teaching as authentic interpretation of the word of God over against all previous understandings.*”⁴

It can be tempting to dismiss these passages as simply impossible and unrealistic. I have even heard preachers wiggle their way out of what Jesus calls us to do. But, as my story about Dr. Bell illustrates, I think we first need to be able to admit what is expected. I may not always do it! But I do think it’s important to wrestle with the truth.

So let’s take a quick look at what Jesus is calling us to do. We begin with anger. Jesus tells us that it’s not just our actions, but the malice in our hearts that betrays us. He calls for us to reconcile with one another before we come to the table. This is honestly what I think might be even harder. It’s one thing to try and stop thinking angry thoughts, it’s a whole other thing to admit those thoughts to someone else. The Apostle

¹ Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 50.

² Matthew 5:17b

³ Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 51.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 50.

Paul echoes these same words in Ephesians 4:26 when he says *“Do not let the sun go down on your anger.”* After anger we have lust. Hare has an interesting idea in his commentary: *“There is nothing novel in the second [antithesis]. Jewish literature was well supplied with warnings that in sexual matters the thought is father to the deed. If there is novelty, it is provided by the context in Jesus’ ministry and in the subsequent fellowship of the church, where women were not avoided as seductresses but welcomed as sisters.”*⁵ Isn’t that a novel idea! Skipping divorce, we end on oaths. The idea here is that Jesus calls us to create a community where a simple “yes” or “no” is enough.

They seem impossible, but let’s put aside our ability to actually put them into action and let’s answer this one simple question: Did Jesus really intend for us to follow them? Because that’s at the heart of our dilemma with these texts. As for myself, I think the answer is obvious, yes, Jesus wants us to step up.

Will we always live them out? Well, that’s where we see that sinner side of ourselves rear its ugly head. But it’s the saint side that we are so quick to dismiss and ignore. Has great evil been done? Yes, but so has great good! There is such wonderful potential in each and every one of us, and God is the one who put it there!

I frequent a website called imgur.com and about a year ago these posts started showing up titled “50 wholesome posts to get you through your day.” Now if you know anything about the internet, it’s not always a place for wholesome. But weirdly, the posts took off! You can see them almost every day! In the beginning the creator would search for stories but it’s now at a point where people are sending him ideas and stories to share. Sometimes they’re big things like collecting coats for a local fundraiser for the

⁵ Ibid, p. 53.

homeless, or other times it's just small stories of hope that bring a smile to your face. We have the passion and ability to do so much that is good, if only we would stop doubting ourselves and believe what God has already given us! Do you think Jesus would have given us these commandments if he didn't think we could follow through with them? Jesus believes in you, so start believing in yourself. Amen.