

SERMON- EPIPHANY 6 (A)

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~~Deuteronomy 30:15-20~~ — ~~Psalm 119:1-8 1~~ — ~~Corinthians 3:1-9~~ — **Matthew 5:21-37**

Good Shepherd (Burke)

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OPENER:

I remember hearing this Gospel lesson one week at church, when I was a child, hearing those difficult and provocative words: “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away... And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.”¹

I remember thinking: that does not quite sound right.

I thought: what is the preacher going to say about this? How is he going to make sense of Jesus’ statements on anger and divorce and the rest?

You can imagine my disappointment, when the rector came up to the pulpit, took a deep breath and said: “As much as I would love to preach on this text, and you would love to hear my explanation about this text.... you will have to wait another 3 years.... Because... today... we have our annual meeting in place of the sermon.”

Everyone laughed and went along their way but there I sat unfulfilled.

I was at that age, Christine has mentioned this before, where children are our resident “moral theologians” and I was unsatisfied.

If it says that, are we not supposed to do that?

“Where is the follow through, people?” I thought.

PREACHING TASK

Now, here I am, facing this text, no annual meeting in sight.

What do we make of this passage in 2020? How do we make sense of what Jesus has to say today?

I mentioned in an Adult Forum a few weeks back how the Gospel of Matthew is not my favorite, and it’s because of passages like this. The Sermon on the Mount is just so hard. Give me cuddly Luke; give me the healing Mark; heck, give me John who I don’t understand half the time, but Matthew’s Jesus seems to raise these ethical demands past where we can go.

¹ Matthew 5.29,30.

We want the Sermon on the Couch, but what we get is the Sermon on the Mount. We want Jesus as life-coach, but we get this Jesus, the new Moses, our Lord and Savior, but an unsettling one.

After reading this passage, where Jesus heightens and intensifies the Law, on all fronts, in terms of violence, in terms of adultery, in terms of divorce, you are left with this sense that Leviticus looks pretty good! There might have been a lot of rules in the Mosaic Law, but at least they were manageable. Dietary restrictions, etc. seem easy to follow after hearing that now we cannot even get angry or look lustfully.

It's almost like Jesus wants us to be perfect... in fact he will say just that very thing in a few verses.²

So one choice might be to avoid our Gospel reading all together, to take refuge in another lesson, maybe in the Psalms.

But the text still beckons.

And so I think, with fear and trembling, we have to talk about the Gospel, and, because we just had Valentines Day, I'd like focus on the section on divorce and adultery.

INTERPRETATION:

The most interesting and revealing part of this passage is, I think, how we look at Jesus' teaching and the Law and how, strangely, we adopt the same mindset of Jesus' opponents. When things get sticky and tough, we all become Pharisees.

Here's an example: when I was teaching, there was one question throughout all my years that was asked more than any other, but, usually, that hand going up in the classroom was asking, more often than not:

"Is this going to be on the test?"

Something about human nature, we want to know how do I look better than the person next to me. That's the strategy of those whom Jesus is arguing with, they are trying to answer the question:

² Matthew 5.48.

“What will satisfy my craving for my own righteousness?”

“What can I do to make sure that I make the cut”

DIVORCE:

So with divorce: the strategy of the Pharisees and most of humanity is to try to parse to the -nth degree to see what is allowed. We want to know what we can do to avoid the lower depths of our sin and reach the upper realms of holiness around marriage, adultery, and sexual morality.

In our passage today, Jesus is speaking to the so-called paragons of morality at the “top” end. Jesus is speaking to those of us, who think we are really something, in terms of our relationships and our sexual politics. To us, Jesus is saying that there is no amount of purity that will be enough, because unless we have ripped out our very eyes, we have failed.

Jesus is describing the logical *impossibility* of following the law so that he might be revealed as the Savior. In the most dramatic language, Jesus shows us the Law so he might bring us up, kill us, then resurrect us.

That is, when you finally hit the ceiling, when you think that you have reached new levels of chastity or morality, you will be in the same boat as the one who hit the bottom, you will realize that we can't do it, not by ourselves.

GOSPEL:

Speaking of the bottom, in the course of his life and ministry, Jesus actually seemed more interested in that direction. Jesus reveled in humanity, cavorting with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes.

Think about the Samaritan Woman at the Well, she had 5 husbands, but Jesus has no problem sharing water, sharing his light and the truth with her. He forgives her, not 5 times, not 7 times, but 70 times 7.³

Think about the widowed woman who marries her former husband's brother (7 times).⁴ Jesus' opponents *think* that Jesus will certainly not look favorably on a woman who has married 7 times to 7 brothers.

³ John 4.4-26; Matthew 18.21-22.

⁴ Luke 20:27-38.

But Jesus says, “You again are asking the wrong question, in my Kingdom, marriage won’t be the end all definition of one’s identity, your identity and very self will be defined and answered in me.”

So you are asking the wrong question, thinking that an obsessive focus on the rules will be your ticket.

In fact, Jesus is saying watch and see how I will make things new in my new creation, that no matter “how low” you think you have dropped, Jesus will be there.

CONCLUSION

On both ends ,high and low, and for most of us who live somewhere in between, Jesus draws out this notion that you cannot get there, not without him, not without his saving grace.

In others words, If you think you are truly pure, if you reckon yourself as righteous, you are kidding yourself.

If you think you are unredeemable, utterly lost and despised, you ain’t seen nothing yet.

This is how Jesus “fulfills the Law” by showing that only through Christ’s overflowing love, that fills up our cups and then overflows it at both ends of the spectrum, can we receive God’s grace.

Jesus is saying then that the question should not be “What am I allowed” but rather:

“What am I called to do in this life? What is my calling and vocation on this good green earth?

What gives me life?” Because God wants us to “choose life” not the death of a loveless marriage, or for that matter, of adultery, or of a life trying to justify ourselves to others.

The final question becomes “Who aids me in my walk with Christ?

What is the relationship, on heaven and earth, that brings me closer to God’s loving embrace?” **AMEN**