

“The Interior”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
6th Sunday after the Epiphany – 15 & 16 February 2020
Matthew 5:21-37

In this section of The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes some claims that seem outrageous to us. He says, “If you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment,” just as if you’d murdered them. Likewise, Jesus says, “that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” That’s bad news for every single straight teenage boy. Who knew that you could commit adultery prior to marriage?

Jesus then says that if our eye beholds beauty and desires it wrongly, or somehow otherwise causes us to offend, then we should get a grapefruit spoon and scoop it out. Same goes for a hand that causes us to sin. It feels gruesome and excessive, and I suspect if we obeyed his instructions literally, there would be fewer hands and eyes in the room.

Jesus starts to wind up this portion of the sermon by denouncing divorce, except in cases of unchastity, which received a new definition in the preceding paragraph. Unchastity could easily be defined as lustful thoughts, since that’s now just the same as adultery. By combining the two together, just about anybody could claim grounds for divorce *on Jesus’ own terms*, though I’m pretty sure that’s not what he intended.

He finishes by raging against swearing, insisting that a simple “Yes” or “No,” twice delivered, ought to suffice as an answer, and any oath taken by heaven or earth “comes from the evil one.” Think about that the next time you give sworn testimony in court. Within the last few months, a few of our parishioners became naturalized citizens by making an oath of allegiance to our country. Did that come “from the evil one”?

If you feel perplexed by these verses, if you sense a palpable absence of grace and forgiveness, you are not alone. These words of Jesus leave the ashy taste of judgment in the mouth, because they deviate so far from what Jesus just said in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are you . . .” and what he emphasizes elsewhere about love and freedom and the hope of redemption. In the very next verse after what we heard read today, Jesus rejects the Old Testament standard of “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Vengeance is not the way for followers of Jesus. Yet he’s recommending self-mutilation for sinful thoughts. What’s Jesus up to?

Like all the rest of us, Jesus uses figures of speech – analogy, metaphor, and in this case hyperbole, making an exaggerated statement to capture our attention and impress upon us the importance of what he’s talking about. And the common thread seems to be that what’s happening on the inside is just as important, if not more so, than what happens on the outside,

This makes sense in the broader context of the gospels, where Jesus entered into frequent conflict with the self-proclaimed experts on the Law. They were obsessed with external observance, and we can also fall to the temptation of making most important how things look on the outside, like the happy facades people put up.

Those self-righteous men wanted to trip Jesus up, to embarrass him by exposing some supposed ignorance or unorthodoxy, so that people would stop listening to Jesus and stop following him. At every turn they failed. Jesus gives a fresh interpretation of the Law that often seems more severe than the typically accepted understanding, because it emphasizes our inward state over our outward action.

Again and again, Jesus broadens the Law so that it includes our thoughts and intentions and attitudes. What’s happening on the inside matters just as much as what’s happening on the outside, because what’s happening inside our heads and hearts, no matter how much restraint we

exercise, eventually impacts other people in bad ways. It also hurts us. It threatens our authenticity and integrity.

For instance, a person thinks about cheating on their spouse but doesn't, out of fear of the possible consequences. The restraint is not motivated by what's right. It's motivated by the risk of getting caught. It's fear, not love, risk, not righteousness, that prevents the person from acting on the thought. Jesus calls us to higher standards, purer motives.

Likewise, a person feels angry and daydreams about getting back at the person who hurt and angered them, but they don't do it, because they're afraid of being caught and suffering the consequences. Again, the motive is selfish. I choose not to go after this person because of the bad things that might happen to me, but inside the mind and heart, we indulge in thoughts of destruction and disaster for the person who offended us.

Jesus reveals a deeper wisdom, and we need to pay attention. He understood that real faith penetrates every layer of a person, right down to the core. If we do the right thing outwardly, but inwardly harbor all sorts of sinful thoughts and desires and attitudes, then we are at perpetual war with God and with ourselves. Over time, that state of affairs erodes our integrity, and we start to dis-integrate.

Jesus wants more for us. He wants us to live in peace, not only with God and others, but also with ourselves. Until we allow faith to alter every aspect of our identity to some degree, God's grace and mercy are mere concepts to us, not realities, not a lived experience. Yet how can we achieve such a sublime state of mind? It seems almost inhuman to expect that our passions can always be quickly and completely quenched. Are we to reject the very feelings that make us human? Even Jesus got angry with his opponents, as they baited him. He said harsh words and made them look foolish.

I think what Jesus wants for us, what Jesus wants *from* us, is that we learn to let go of emotions and feelings that threaten to imprison and destroy us. Jesus wants to liberate us from the consuming fire of anger and lust, so that we can be free to experience the more fulfilling sensations of joy and hope and peace and love. Our freedom will require sacrifice. Letting go of our grudges, resentments, and fantasies may feel like tearing out an eye or chopping off a hand. However, such sacrifices are necessary and worth it if we want to be faithful and receive the fruits of faith.

I think Jesus wants us to keep our commitments to God and to each other for the right reasons, and to do so in the right way, with integrity and authenticity. We don't need solemn oaths when the simple answer of yes or no will suffice, and the yes or no that matters more than any other is the yes or no answer we give to God's offer of unconditional love every moment of every day. That unconditional love comes with no strings attached, and when we receive it, God's love transforms us into people aware of a responsibility to discipleship, of obedience to our Lord, who sets us free.

I think Jesus calls us to ideas and attitudes and motivations that seem inhuman, because Jesus wants us to transcend our common, sinful humanity and live into God's higher purpose for human beings, as creatures created in the image and likeness of God, ready to share with others the abundance grace God so generously gives.

Still, it seems impossible to meet such extraordinary standards, and time after time, we will fail. We cannot do such hard things alone, but grace carries us beyond our own natural abilities. Forgiveness heals our faults, if we ask for and receive it humbly. Prayer is indispensable to this endeavor, and not just the asking and the thanking types of prayer, precious as those are, but the patiently sitting still silent type of prayer, that waits for God and listens for guidance and

discernment. It's hard work, but as St. Augustine once said, "Work as if everything depends upon you, and pray because everything depends on God."

Jesus didn't come to leave us as we are or to ask for minor tweaks to our behavior. Jesus came to transform us – body, mind, and spirit – into people who act and look and feel much differently from what we did before. It is a gradual process that demands patience, though we do have occasional major breakthroughs, epiphanies. Faith can be frustrating, but over time it takes us to a new world of altered perception.

We will see things in a different light, and the brighter the horizon becomes, we look back at where we used to be before and wonder how we ever derived any happiness or pleasure from that shadowy, confusing, conflicted place where we used to be. We will feel differently, kept warm not by our anger and hate and unquenchable desires, but by God's love. We will be different, no longer at war with ourselves and others, but abiding in God's deep peace.

Jesus made some outrageous claims in the Sermon on the Mount. Upon closer reflection, though, they make sense, because the primary claim Jesus makes is a claim he stakes on us. It's not a partial claim, but a total claim. We belong to him, and thanks be to God for that, because when we belong to Jesus, he belongs with us. Amen.