

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 16, 2020
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalm 119:1-8
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-27

You have heard that it was said ...

You have heard that it was said, "The Bible says it. I believe. And that settles it."
But I say to you, "It ain't that simple."

I say that to you because precious little in the Bible – or in life – *is* that simple and because the Jesus we encounter in the gospels didn't resort to anything so simplistic either. It's not because Jesus didn't take it all seriously. To the contrary, the way I hear it, Jesus says what he says in this morning's gospel precisely because he takes it all *very* seriously.

In Matthew, Jesus is the rabbi *par excellence*, the new Moses. That's a point to keep in mind through the whole of this gospel, and particularly this morning. Jesus is being very rabbinic, very Jewish.

We miss the point entirely if we hear Jesus to be telling us that he is initiating a new law that both exceeds and supersedes the old law of his forebears. No, Jesus loves and honors the tradition he was raised in. He's not trying to fix or replace the Law. He's trying to teach it, to help his followers understand it and to follow it.

This 1st century Jewish way of thinking is very un-American, if I can put it that way. We tend to see rules and commandments as restrictions on our freedoms. Even if we recognize the point, we don't necessarily appreciate them. We pay our taxes, even as we look for the deductions. But Jesus, as a Jew, would have loved the Law and the Prophets. He would have understood the point made by Moses in our first reading this morning, that it's a gift and a blessing:

*I call heaven and earth to witness ... that I have set before you life and death,
blessings and curses. Choose life ...*

Jesus would have memorized the text and relished in the poetic structure of Psalm 119, the longest of all the Psalms, each eight-verse stanza offering thanks and praise for the decrees and the statutes and the commandments and the judgments give life. We recited only the first stanza, but the love of the Law is there right from the very first verse:

*Happy are they whose way is blameless, *
who walk in the law of the LORD!*

Maybe it'd be easier for us to imagine a Jewish love of the Law if it had been translated as *Tao* – the Chinese word for "Way" – or the Hindu *Dharma*. We wouldn't be far off.

Today's gospel is just part of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." He's been preaching a while by the time we hear him this morning. And in the verses immediately before we begin, Jesus explicitly said he had no intention to abolish the Law that he loved:

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 ... For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

And there's the hint that Jesus is striving for more than mere rule-keeping. He's imploring us to get into the kingdom – which is to say, more than getting into heaven when we die, he wants us to start living now as God dreams for us to live. Jesus trusts that the Law is supposed to be life-giving, and therefore can still help us.

But following the rules isn't going to get us where God dreams for us to be. So Jesus – as a good rabbi – wrestles with the texts; he digs deeper, down to the roots, to get to the heart of it all.

It takes more than following the rules of the road. After all, by way of analogy, you can study, even memorize the motor vehicle laws in the driver's manual. And even if you were meticulous in your obedience to those laws, it still wouldn't make you a good driver. The law cannot mandate that we *care* about others on the road with us. It cannot mandate courtesy. It cannot mandate the need for us sometimes to try to think what the other driver is thinking.

In that same way, as I hear it, Jesus is calling for us to do more than merely study, memorize, and obey the Law; he's calling for a new mindset, a new "heartset" ... lest life be reduced to a moral (and all-too-often self-justifying) checklist:

no murder today – check;
no adultery today – check; ...

But this rabbi wants more from us. More than merely avoiding doing wrong, Jesus is inviting us to make things right. He wants us to regard ourselves and each other as God regards each and every one of us. He envisions life as God intends it to be, and invites us to take our part – in ways both big and small – to make it so.

So let's take a brief look at the particulars.

A person can "not murder" and still do nothing to create a life-giving society. You can "not murder" and still kill relationships. We do violence to others long before we come to blows. Even name-calling comes into play. We miss some of the thrust in our translation, but Jesus is saying that you don't call someone you should refer to a member of your family an "empty-headed nit-wit" or a "worthless fool," not if your calling is to create a beloved community. ⁱ

And Jesus says it matters not a whit who is in the wrong. We do violence to one another when we could seek reconciliation and instead choose to justify ourselves. It matters not who started the quarrel; it matters only who stands in a position to end it.

The problems with adultery and lust and divorce are more specific to men than to women. I'm not saying only a man can look at a woman with lust (as Jesus puts it this morning). But this discussion is very culturally specific. Jesus is less bothered by impure thoughts, I think, than by the power dynamics he sees going on between the men and women of his day.

Too easy for a man in that context "not to commit adultery," and still cheapen every relationship he should cherish. Anything short of keeping primary relationships primary is a failure of the promises and vows of marriage. Too easily any person can "cheat" those we love by failing to cherish them as we should. And there's harm inevitably done to any relationship whenever we ogle another rather than regard their full humanity.

And as for his words on divorce ... we really need to take care. Husbands have casually abandoned wives in all times, even now of course, but divorce in the ancient world was not what it is in our world today. A man could, in Jesus' day, follow the letter of the law and divorce his wife – just fill out the paperwork and literally "write her off."

And in a world where women were dependent on men for food and shelter, women had to hope they did not cause displeasure to their husbands (while the husbands were largely free to do as they wished). And a woman "released" – that's the term used for divorce; it's a bitter irony ... a woman "released" from a marriage might be left with little choice but to remarry as best she could as soon as she could. It's rather like, as Jesus describes it here, forcing her to commit adultery.

And finally, as for oaths. A person who swears an oath may be far from honest. Does it imply that those other times when I don't swear an oath – "cross my heart and hope to die" – that I'm free to lie? The more people swear "on the Bible" or "on my mother's life," the more suspicious they seem. (Or is that just me?) That's the bloated speech of people who have no intention of doing what they say.

Jesus would replace oath-taking with integrity. The words we speak should match the thoughts of our hearts and be satisfied by the deeds we perform. If honest communication and integral living is what promotes and sustains the common life, just say yes or say no.

You have heard that it was said, "The Bible says it. I believe. And that settles it."

But I say to you, "The Bible doesn't settle anything so easily. It was never meant to. It merely gets us started."

If we follow the example from this morning's gospel, these words invite us to dig deeper, to get to the heart of it all, to discover what gives life in our world. And when all is said and done: "Choose life."

In his paraphrase of this passage, Eugene Peterson characterizes rule-keepers as the kind of people who "pretend" to be righteous, using "legal cover to mask a moral failure." But Jesus invites us to a righteousness that exceeds merely keeping the rules. He invites us to enter the kingdom he announces and shares with us. Doing more than not doing wrong, Jesus invites us into the creative work of doing right, the holy work of making things right.

¹ The more literal translation of Matthew 5:22 should be (according to my *Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*):

But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment; and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council; but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.

Raca is an obscure word, it seems, but clearly an insult. I offer "empty-headed nit-wit" for our consideration. In today's political landscape, it's easy to decide those we disagree with haven't a decent thought in their heads and so we can be dismissive of them.

I'm not a fan of "hell fire" at the end. The word is actually Gehenna, the dump outside of Jerusalem, often on fire. It's not a pleasant place to be tossed, but it's clearly a metaphorical landmark here, so instead of "hell fire" why not leave it for us to decide its meaning? (Perhaps Jesus is suggesting nothing more (nor less!) than the failure to nurture relationships renders a person as no better than waste, and such a life should be tossed in the dump.)