

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (Epiphany 6A)i – February 16, 2014
Deuteronomy 30:15-20 or Ecclesiasticus/Sirach 15:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8;
1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

During this Epiphany season, over four straight weeks we are called to deal with different parts of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. As I stated last week, Jesus calls forth coherence and congruence between the inner heart and the outward action; and in his Sermon on the Mount, he creates an "ethics of perfection" of thought, word and deed, as it were—because we need both right attitude and right speech and right action, in right relationship, to be complete, to be whole and to live faithfully in this world.

Jesus had elsewhere re-affirmed that the two supreme laws are to love God with all our hearts and minds and souls, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. "On these two commandments depend/hang all the law and the prophets" is the way he put it.ⁱⁱ By going to the heart of God's law and finding the love and justice ethic within his own tradition, Jesus, in fact, *extended and transcended* the law rather than abandon or loosen it—as he said earlier in his Sermon on the Mount, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus came to give us life abundantly, and as he wants us to live lives of deep gladness and purpose, he knows the way to do that is with singleness of heart. And so, diving into today's gospel—Jesus calls forth congruence between the inner heart and the outward action as he calls us to strive for a life not given over to destructive and self-destructive dispositions and actions. Thus, in the part we hear today, Jesus connects even the bitter heart and malicious thought with the act of murder, and the lustful heart and salacious thought with the act of adultery, and so on.

To bring his point home, in exaggerated form, Jesus uses the metaphor of the body, and states that it is better to physically remove all that prevents or impedes such congruence, and to enter life in the Kingdom of God maimed, or with one eye, so to speak. Now if taken literally, this would lead to both the world and churches *full* of one-eyed, one-handed people! So don't take them literally—not even the Fundamentalists take these literally. But do take them truthfully, these surgical metaphors. Being truly available to God, others, and our true self sometimes requires a letting go as painful as losing an eye or a hand; a letting go of our old grudges, bitterness and discontents; a letting go of our proclivity towards violence; a letting go of our prerogatives and privilege that keep us over and apart from others; a letting go of our neediness or covetousness that has us "lookin' for love in all the wrong places," as the song goes.

Now, some believe that all we have to do in any kind of ethical dilemma is look it up in the book and act accordingly.^{iv} As Henri Nouwen pointed out, "We are all legalists most of the time. All of us enjoy the feeling of peace and security that can come from obeying a clear, specific code of conduct; and every society and religious community does its best to provide them...[such codes of conduct] have a certain place in our lives. They also offer us a certain safety and comfort, but when they become our main coping device, they make us rigid, even dead."^v

Rather than answer ethical dilemmas by looking it up in a book, Jesus, on the other hand, says all you have to do is love God and your neighbor and yourself. That may seem even more appealing until, in dilemma after dilemma, you have to try to figure out just how to go about doing it. As Frederick Buechner points out, “The difficulty is increased when you realize that by loving God, and your neighbors [and yourself], Jesus does not mean loving as primarily a feeling. Instead, he seems to mean that whether or not any feeling is involved, loving God means honoring and obeying and staying in constant touch with God; and loving your neighbors means acting in their best interests no matter what, even if personally you can’t stand them.”^{vi}

Nothing illustrates the difficulty of all this better than the situation of two married people who for one reason or another decide to divorce, but take their faith and their relationship seriously enough to want to do what is right for themselves and each other. As they say, marriages are made in heaven...but so are thunder and lightning, tornadoes and hail, and snowstorms! Divorce has touched each and every one of us, whether as a spouse, or as a child, a parent or a friend—myself included. For the religious leadership of Jesus’ day the law book on divorce was clear cut. For them husband and wife were not equal—the woman was the property of her husband (Deuteronomy 21:14; Exodus 21:7), a possession among others. Thus she had no claim on the fidelity of her husband, and therefore, her husband could never be accused of adultery towards her. Only a man had the right to divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1) and the consequences for women after divorce were often devastating, socially and economically. Given that marriage was also the marriage of two extended families, divorce was also a great challenge especially to the now dishonored family of the divorced woman. So, for the man divorce was an easy process, but for the woman it was nearly impossible. In fact, for the man the process became so easy that for the most trivial reasons, or for no reason at all, divorce could be granted by the religious (rabbinical) court.^{vii}

This view, of course, has roots deep in the patriarchal cultures of that day, and we still see it playing out in some more traditional cultures even in our own time. Some of this is even enshrined in the Creation stories. We say in our service of Holy Matrimony, “The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation.”^{viii} But *which* version of the Creation? In the creation story from the second chapter of Genesis we hear that God creates Adam first, and only afterwards, realizing that “it is not good that the man should be alone”, God decides to make a “helper” for him, thus fashioning Eve out of one of Adam’s ribs and calling her woman, because she was taken out of man. However, in the first chapter of Genesis, a completely different creation scenario is told. To quote that first chapter, “So God created humankind in His image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). In this version, the female as much as the male is a reflection of the Creator. They are created at the same time, and they are created equals. God blesses them and charges them together—the female along with the male—with stewardship over the earth. This first chapter of Genesis is in stark contrast to the other version in the second chapter. These conflicting views of woman’s role in the order of things scarcely needs to be spelled out

further; nor is it necessary to point out which version of the creation story has prevailed and played out the most through the centuries.

In speaking against divorce (especially to remarry), Jesus is reacting to the easy, quick double-standard, male-initiated divorce allowed for in the religious law. “What God has joined together let no one separate,” is the way Jesus puts it in Mark’s gospel (10:2-12, esp. v 9). In the portion we read from Matthew’s gospel today, Jesus acknowledged the religious law that unchastity on the woman’s part may be considered justifiable grounds for divorce, but he was clearly not happy about it (Matthew 5:31-32; see also 19:8-9). Jesus takes his law of love and his insistence on coherence of thought, word and deed, and supersedes the religious law on divorce—and he puts an extra dig in at the popular double-standard against women by saying that the husband also would be guilty of adultery for divorcing his wife in order to marry another. And so, it is also Jesus’ reaction to injustice against women that leads him to a rather hard line on divorce. But presumably, even this hard line is to be judged by the same standards as the great commandments of the love of God, and of neighbor and self. As Frederick Buechner asks,

“Who knows what has gone amiss in [a] marriage? Who knows which partner, if either, is more at fault? Who knows what the long-term results, either of splitting up or of staying together, will be? If there are children, who can say which will be better for them, those small[er /younger] neighbors...[we are called to love]? Will it be living on with married parents whose constant battling, say, can do terrible things to a child? Or will it be going off with one divorced parent or the other, and falling victim thereby to all the feelings of rejection, guilt and loss which can do equally terrible things to a child, if not more so? What would the Law of Love have you do in a situation so complex, precarious and fateful? How can you best serve, in love, the best interests of the husband or wife you are miserable with, [as well as] your children, yourself, [and] God? There is no book to look up the answer in. There is only your own heart and whatever by God’s grace it has picked up in the way of insight, honesty, courage, humility, and, maybe above everything else, compassion.”^{ix}

I leave you with these thoughts this morning. May God bless us as we deal with all our various ethical dilemmas this week.

ⁱ See also Lent 3B, and Proper 22B

ⁱⁱ Matthew 22:40

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 5:17

^{iv} Obviously, there are lots of commandments and laws not just in Scripture but throughout society. Some of them seem too harsh, others not protective enough. A lot of times laws are confusing, even conflicting—for example laws which serve local concerns but which violate higher laws of the land. Then there are even higher laws, such as international law and international agreements which, according to our own Constitution, are the highest laws of our land, but which often seem to be too undesirable or breakable, unattainable or subtle, ineffective and unenforceable, as evidenced in the ways some of these higher laws have been flouted. As well, there are unjust laws, laws that have had to be broken and then

repealed. Whole movements such as the anti-slavery and women's suffrage movements, and later the Civil Rights movement—and other movements for social justice at work today—have had to struggle to get unjust laws replaced by just laws. Here at home and around the world we still have some ways to go.

So, what is law anyway? As Frederick Buechner points out, there are basically two kinds. The first kind are laws of the way things ought to be. The second kind are laws of the way things are. He cites the law of "No Trespassing" as an example of the first kind and the Law of Gravity as an example of the second kind. Now many people think God's Law, like the 10 Commandments, or the Sermon on the Mount, has to be spelled out in terms of the first kind of law, a compendium of do's and don'ts, oughts and shall nots. Certainly, most laws of society fit this first category. These laws are the work of legislators, courts, and custom. When obeyed, these laws serve the useful purpose of keeping a degree of order within a free civil society, and of keeping us from each other's throats. Human beings, being prone to evil either as perpetrators or victims, need the support of law. As the theologian Paul Tillich stated: "Since the law cannot be wholly internalized in the conscience of imperfect humanity, conscience must be externalized into law." Therefore we need to elevate people to the level of most laws and not to lower the law to the level of the people. At the very least, if laws cannot make evil people good, they can make the innocent safe. As Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, "morals cannot be legislated but behavior can be regulated."

Then what about God's Law, such as the 10 Commandments? If all they are are a compendium of do's and don'ts then they can do no more than keep us from each others' throats. From ancient times to the present, various religious institutions and communities have been highly structured, with clear-cut policies and procedures, routines and rituals, laws and statutes that build cohesion, identity and a certain resilience to face an otherwise hostile world.

It was such a religious "in-group" legal system, which Jesus found himself confronting. Whether by violating certain dietary or ritual laws, as he associated with foreigners and social outcasts, and healed on the Sabbath; or as he overturned the tables in the Temple precincts, Jesus cut through certain laws to expose legalism and inequity and called for a refocusing on the real purpose and heart of God's law, namely to promote justice and love.

But rather than abandoning all the wisdom and guidance of the ethical tradition of religious law for a love and justice ethic that is somehow separate from all that; instead, Jesus, by going to the heart of God's law and finding the love and justice ethic within his own tradition, in fact extended the law rather than abandoning it. Jesus says it this way in his Sermon on the Mount, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." (Matthew. 5:17). Of course in fulfilling the deeper meaning of the law, Jesus ends up breaking some lesser laws.

As Buechner points out, all this doesn't mean that there isn't a positive Law of God good for all people and between nations even though it's no secret that ideas about what is Right and Wrong vary from time to time and place to place. For example, King Solomon with his 700 wives would not be apt to see eye to eye with a Southern Baptist missionary on the subject of having more than one spouse. Now does that mean that morality is all relative to the tastes of the time and is not to be taken any more seriously than tastes in food, dress, or anything else? On one level, this may be so. But there is a much deeper level. We can see this in the following ways. Again, Buechner states,

"In order to be healthy, there are certain rules you can break only at your own peril: eat sensibly, get enough sleep and exercise, avoid bottles marked poison, don't jump out of boats unless you can swim[, and so on. And in order to be satisfied with life,] there are also certain rules you can break only at your peril: [such as] be at peace with [yourself and] your neighbor; get rid of hatred and envy; [speak] the truth; avoid temptations to evil [that] you're not strong enough to resist; don't murder [or] steal [and so on]. Both sets of rules, [rules of health and rules for a satisfied life], are as valid for [Moses or Solomon, or a first century Jew or Christian like Paul; or for a Christian as for a Muslim here and now]. Both sets of rules—the hygienic as well as the moral, describe not [so much] the way people feel life ought to be, but the way they have found [that] life is."

The Law of Love—Spiritual law—is thus a law of the way things are, and only then is it the law of the way things ought to be. It is stated succinctly in the Bible in the First Letter of John (3:14): “Whoever does not love, abides in death.” Like it or not, that’s how it is. “Whoever does not love, abides in death” That applies to individuals, communities, and whole nations. Just as Jesus did not abolish the wisdom of his religious ethical tradition with his love and justice ethic but instead fulfilled it by focusing on its true spirit and intention, we too would do well with the opportunities and pitfalls of living in a global village and with our modern technology to balance all that with the wisdom of the ethical traditions shared by the world’s great faith traditions including our own. We should uphold those principles of the God-given dignity of the human person and the preciousness of life as we attempt to live out this love and justice ethic in our perilous times. As the Bible puts it, “whoever does not love abides in death.” Or, as Buechner concludes, if we don’t believe that, we can always put it to the test--interpersonally, or internationally--just the way if we don’t believe the law of gravity, we can always step out a tenth-story window. - Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 50-51, 63-64. See also Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 72-74.

^v Henri Nouwen, Lifesigns (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1986), pp. 92-93

^{vi} Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 73.

^{vii} According to Moses’ original provision on divorce found in the 24th chapter of Deuteronomy (vv. 1-4), a man could divorce his wife if he found in her “something objectionable.” Although there was a school of teachers (rabbis) and lawyers who interpreted that crucial Scriptural phrase as referring only to the occurrence of adultery, the prevailing school of (rabbinic) thought was considerably more open-ended than that. The school of Hillel, for example, said that the phrase, “something objectionable” could mean even if the wife spoiled a dish of food.

^{viii} Book of Common Prayer, p. 423

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 74.