

**Year A: Epiphany 6b Deut 30:15-20; Ps 119:1-8; 1Cor 3:1-9; Mt 5:21-37
St. Barnabas, Florissant – February 16, 2020**

Focus Sentence: Jesus calls us to righteousness from the inside out.

SERMON

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit....

This morning we're encountering the part of the Sermon on the Mount during which we might wish the disciples had fallen asleep --- or had been doodling on the back of their bulletins. Then they might have missed more of the incisiveness with which Jesus spoke about: murder/anger; a spirit of contempt/irreconciliation; and lust/adultery.

It makes you wish that Jesus had stuck more to "religion" rather than addressing these all-too-common "little things" that keep sneaking into our everyday lives.

But maybe it was just BECAUSE the disciples in general, and the early Church in particular, had more than a little trouble with anger, lust, and alienation that they listened on the edge of their seats to what Jesus had to say about them.

They knew that the Gospel has its greatest impact when it's related to the common struggles of human existence. Do you think they knew of anyone – themselves included – who didn't have trouble with anger, or alienation, or sex?

To begin with, Matthew makes sure that his readers understand that Jesus was not repudiating the Mosaic Law (5:17), but taking the Law to a new and deeper level of compassion by putting his interpretation on it. In other words, Jesus wasn't postulating a "new law"; on the contrary, he would have been an advocate of what the Psalmist joyfully celebrated ABOUT the Law: *"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much gold; sweeter also than honey."* (from Ps. 19:7-10)

When Jesus makes the jaws of the disciples drop by telling them that “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (18:3), Jesus wasn’t suggesting juvenile regression. What Jesus seems to be stressing is that “big disciples” need to learn the humility and fresh-faced openness of those “little ones.” (18:4)

This attitude toward life and toward God also includes *anger*. Have you ever seen a toddler who, when wet or hungry, didn’t let more than a little rage fly? In this case, it’s natural and self-preserving, and expressed unselfconsciously. It doesn’t need to be repressed, and can’t be, without doing serious emotional and spiritual harm.

Followers of Jesus will get mad too, as children do --- but then they’re to forget it. They’re to go on. They’re to let go of it; to let it pass. Feel the anger, as Jesus did toward the moneychangers in the temple, “break a little glass” if that’s what’s called for -- but then move on.

Do you think that Jesus could have forgiven his executioners if he had nursed a grudge against them? So, his followers, likewise, are not to nurse grudges. They’re not to let their “hot” anger turn to “cold” anger, because it’s just such “cold” anger that freezes into hate and takes years of unthawing and healing, if ever, to undo.

When C. H. Dodd appropriately translates the saying in verse 22 on murder/anger as meaning “anyone who nurses anger against his brother [or sister]”, he comes closest to the point Jesus makes. As adult Christians, we’re to be *aware* of our anger; *feel* it; when appropriate, *express* it; but then let it go.

Give it to God, lest it begin to rule our lives and turn into hate. All murder is premeditated, according to Jesus. It begins within – in that nursed anger – before it explodes into life-extinguishing force.

PAUSE

And then, what about our relationships?

Perhaps the most noticeable work of the Gospel of Jesus in our lives is the creation of an “enlarged heart.” As growing Christians, we begin to see the world with softer eyes. A spirit of judgment is replaced with a spirit of forbearance. As Paul writes to the Corinthians: Love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1Cor 13:7). But this engraced state doesn’t mean that disciples of Jesus are to become a bowl of warm Pablum without any definition or boundaries!

It DOES mean that anyone who sincerely wants to live the life of the Spirit will take the initiative in making amends in broken relationships – a proactive stance of goodwill that takes precedence even over worship, even over our offerings.

In effect, Jesus is saying that to worship rightly is first to make the effort to be reconciled with any alienated sister or brother. Whether or not that person accepts this initiative of goodwill isn’t mentioned, as it’s not the responsibility of the disciple to make the other party accept it. That’s up to him or her. The complete love of Abba has no limits; therefore, neither should the engraced love of Jesus’ disciples have limits (Mt. 5:43-48).

PAUSE

And then there’s the issue of sex.

Deuteronomy 5:21 declares, “Neither shall you covet your neighbor’s wife.” This doesn’t mean that sexual desire in itself is sinful, a truism that has led some joker to remark: “Sex is dirty; save it for the one you love,” or for St. Jerome to comment, “For the preservation of chastity, an empty and rumbling stomach and fevered lungs are indispensable.”

What it DOES mean is that sexual desire, like any other God-given impulse, can become twisted and obsessive. Just as a disease begins as malignant energy before its symptoms are manifested physically, so does adultery begin long before it’s actually acted out.

As my favorite writer, Frederick Buechner has said, “Sex is like nitroglycerin; it can be used to heal hearts or to blow up bridges.” Therefore, the right use of sex in marriage begins with healing the core of the human personality.

Lust is too often romanced, for its own sake, and, as with anger, clung to. The imagination “nurses” lust from emotional energy into physical expression – and then on to the disastrous consequences it can have for everybody involved. Jesus instead offers his disciples a healthy dose of preventive medicine: feel sexual attraction outside of marriage as a healthy affirmation of our common humanness, but then let it go.

PAUSE

In all these instances, if we were judged on our “thoughts” alone, we’d all no doubt be behind bars. That’s not the good news. What IS the good news is that, in Christ, we have the power to allow thoughts to be just thoughts and not let them become destructive obsessions.

In Christ, and through the love of the community gathered in Christ’s name, we have the Divine power that allows us to feel the full range of human emotions, to acknowledge them, to affirm them, to learn from them – but not to let them get out of control or rule our lives.

Jesus wants it understood that his Kingdom doesn’t simply consist of legalistic rules and regulations imposed on evil people to keep them in check. As citizens of this unseen Kingdom, the followers of Jesus are to be rigorously honest *as a by-product* of their new nature.

No contracts, no reams of incomprehensible paperwork, no swearing on a stack of Bibles can change a twisted character. That’s why Jesus calls for *metanoia* (literally, a change of mind) rather than a new set of rules.

Jesus calls for a changed heart, not a change of law. Jesus deals with things that, by nature, can't be the object of legal regulation: Jesus insists on obedience in *disposition* as well as in *deed*. No one can serve two masters, and, according to Jesus, God wants possession of our whole person, beginning from the inside out. As G. K. Chesterton wrote: "Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair."

So my prayer this morning is that each one of us will indeed become humble and open to God's love like those little children Jesus spoke of.

AMEN.