



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 6 (A)

Mining the Riches

[RCL] Deuteronomy 30:15-20 or Sirach 15:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

In today's Gospel, we may be tempted to hear Jesus set aside the Law of Moses in favor of a newer, more up-to-date version of God's teaching. His speech does have that sort of pattern to it:

"You have heard that it was said... but I say to you..."

"It was also said... but I say to you..."

"Again, you have heard... but I say..."

It sounds a lot like, "Not *that*, but *this*."

Even though we may be tempted to hear his words this way at first, getting rid of the old law in order to replace it with a new one isn't quite what Jesus has in mind.

Instead, he's reiterating established law to draw even deeper meaning from it. So, it's not so much, "I am creating a *new* law for you," as much as it is, "I am *mining the riches of the law that God has already given you*."

There are several examples in this morning's passage. In one, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'" (That's good stuff. There's no updating necessary. Killing people is wrong, so don't do it. What could be simpler?)

Jesus continues, "But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."

By adding that second part to his interpretation of the law, Jesus reveals meaning that we may not have heard at first. It's not *only* murder that's wrong. It's also name-calling, insulting, and unwarranted anger.

These things may not be nearly as bad as murder, but like murder, they devalue human life. To kill is to render a life utterly meaningless, to totally and completely devalue God's presence in another. Of course, most people aren't murderers. Yet pretty much all people have a tendency to devalue human life. Even

some of the saintliest folks in the world have, in a moment of outrage, uttered hateful, spiteful, or even violent words.

Insulting or cursing someone—even if only during the briefest period of lapsed judgment—ignores the divine light within that person, and that’s tantamount to wishing them dead, which, like the act of killing itself, devalues the sanctity of their life.

So no, it’s not *just* murder that’s bad. It’s anything that disparages human life. You see, Jesus is not saying “out with the old law and in with a new.” He’s saying, “Please, remember this other stuff, too.”

Understanding that Jesus is augmenting the law, rather than contradicting it, is a good lesson. But it’s not the only lesson today’s reading offers us. To conclude the sermon here might be to reinforce the moral that name-calling is just as bad as murder or that either or both of those things could have you burning for eternity!

But that’s not what Jesus is getting at. Banishing us to the fiery pits of hell really isn’t Jesus’ style. Fire and brimstone preaching was developed much later by preachers with a very different agenda.

Jesus’ overarching message is one of grace and peace, love and hope, forgiveness and redemption. If any of his words today seem particularly harsh, perhaps it’s best to consider that it is because he wants our attention.

Perhaps it’s because he wants us to understand that it is possible for us to live in right relationship with God and our neighbors. Perhaps it’s because he wants us to understand that anger and insults too often keep us from doing just that. Perhaps it’s because he wants us to understand that unbridled lust can lead us to depression and malcontent. Perhaps it’s because he wants us to understand that the sacred bond of marriage should not be dissolved at a man’s whim. Perhaps it’s because he wants us to understand that there is no honor in making fancy promises that we cannot keep.

It could be any of those things. Or, perhaps most of all, it could be because he wants us to understand that our previous sins do not prohibit us from standing now and evermore secure in the grace of God.

When discussing murder, anger, and insult, Jesus offers the following advice. “When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

These words may also seem a tad extreme, but we can rest assured that if Jesus isn’t in the business of scrapping ancient Hebrew law, then he certainly isn’t in the business of chasing anyone out of church. This is to say, Jesus does not require each and every person who momentarily recalls some interpersonal conflict to get up and head for the nearest exit.

However, by offering the image of someone leaving a house of worship to go and be reconciled to their sibling in the faith, Jesus does seem to be making an urgent case for us to hone our habits of reconciliation.

Whenever we are reminded of a transgression that needs forgiving or a relationship that needs restoring—even if it is during a time as important as worship—Jesus expects us to take it seriously.

Whoever we are, wherever we are, and whenever it is that we remember such a thing, Jesus calls us to the important work of reconciliation—right then!

This advice is pretty pastoral. If ever we remember a fault of our own or the error of another, Jesus doesn't want one more second to go by without us orienting our minds toward the healing power of reconciliation. It is a reminder that such things are not the end of the world; there is wholeness yet to come.

In keeping with that same pastoral spirit, it is important to note that there are circumstances in life, such as in the aftermath of certain broken marriages, when personal reconciliation may not be appropriate, healthy, or safe. Of this we can be sure: Jesus understands and honors our individual contexts and personal choices.

As for times when reconciliation is appropriate, Jesus believes that it is what is best. That's why he says to get up and go. As far as he's concerned, the sooner that we experience the peace of reconciliation, the better.

So, if any one of us decides to get up, walk out, and tend to something right now, that would be just fine. But we always have the option to stick around and soak up even more Jesus.

That certainly can't hurt.

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