

Sunday, February 12, 2023
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)
Deuteronomy 30.15-20; Matthew 5.21-37

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/526589992797025>

(Sermon begins at about 20:45)

“The Spirit of the Law”

Today we continue our look at Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. At the end of the portion we heard last week, Jesus says two things regarding the Law. The first is “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill (Mt 5.17). Emphasizing that what he is now teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and in his ministry in general is not anything particularly new. It’s all there in the Scriptures, in the Law handed down by God and in its application through the words of the Prophets. Rather, if anything, Jesus sees his purpose as getting back to basics. That he is to help the people get back on track, in alignment with the original intent of the Law, which, over time, has gotten a little lost in application in the lives of individuals and in the life of the community. Jesus makes this more explicit in his second statement on the subject: “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5.20). Imploring his listeners to seek righteousness—right living—that is, living in accordance with the laws of God. Not like some of the scribes and Pharisees who were sticklers for making sure others lived according to the Law, but were not always so concerned about the strict adherence to the Law in their own lives. Particularly when it was to their benefit, be it financially or politically.

In today’s Gospel passage, Jesus goes on to cite four specific examples of laws in which our understanding might need to be adjusted to be more in accordance with the original intent. Three are directly from the Ten Commandments, and one is from other parts of the Law. Laws having to do with murder, adultery, divorce, and oaths. Interesting choices, ranging from incredibly serious—the sanctity of life—to the seemingly benign—the use of oaths. So why these particular laws, of all the 613 commandments recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures?

Before we get into the four laws themselves and what Jesus intends in lifting these up, it will be helpful to establish a framework for analyzing or interpreting what Jesus is up to. For that, we need to step back to our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy literally means “second law” or “a copy of the law.” It is a reiteration of, an expanding upon, portions of the book of Exodus, which records not only the Hebrews’ 40 years in the wilderness, but also God’s giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. Much of Deuteronomy is framed as a speech Moses delivers to the Hebrews before their entry into the Promised Land. Essentially reminding them of who they are as God’s Chosen People, where they have been and what they have experienced over the last 40 years, and emphasizing the laws and commandments God has given them and exhorting them to stay faithful to their adherence. The words we hear today are the end of Moses’ speech/sermon. We hear this most vividly when he eloquently summarizes the purpose of their journey:

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess . . . I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life.”

Conveying that the Law is not meant to be a burden, a set of onerous requirements. Rather, the Law is meant to be a guide, a framework, for what healthy relationship with God and with one another looks like. All boiled down into two simple, yet weighty words: “Choose life.” Choose life. Choose life as individuals. Choose life as a community. Choose to live into who you are called to be as God’s Chosen People.

“Choose life” being the communal framing of what Jesus says about himself some 1,300 years later: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” That Jesus’ purpose is to help the people get back on track and to once again “choose life.” To get back to the life God desires for them. Life that is characterized by another set of laws: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all you soul, and with all your mind . . . and . . . love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22.37-39). Of which Jesus follows up “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Reminiscent of what he says about himself in the Sermon on the Mount. A reminder that all laws given by God have at their root and as their primary intent healthy relationship—with God, with self, and with others. That it is these healthy relationships that lead and contribute to the life God desires for us, individually and communally. An invitation to the people to choose life by loving God and loving their neighbor. This is the lens, the framework, for understanding Jesus’ interpretations of the four laws cited in today’s Gospel.

Regarding murder, 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.’ 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.” Obviously murdering someone is the most egregious demonstration of NOT loving your neighbor. But here, in reframing the prohibition against murder, Jesus is essentially warning that murder is merely the end result of a potentially dangerous chain of events. A potentially slippery slope. One just does not decide to murder someone. First it starts with animosity; giving way to hatred; leading to abuse, be it emotional, verbal, even physical; resulting in injury. And then, if things get out of hand, the ultimate form of injury: the taking of a life. Of course, simple animosity does not always give rise to this chain of events—at least not all of them. But Jesus’ point is that, our fundamental guiding principle is to love God and love neighbor. Animosity and hatred, even if not leading to actions as drastic as physical harm or even murder, serve to diminish and devalue the life of another person. Which is certainly not conducive to and is inconsistent with healthy communal life.

Regarding adultery, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Here again, Jesus is implying potential chains of events. That lust

and desire for another can lead to objectifying that person, potentially treating them as something to be possessed, even controlled. As something to be used for one's own gratification, without regard for the effects on the other. Of the effects on the object of lust for starters. And if the offender is married, of the effects on their spouse and family. Jesus' point being that part of loving our neighbor as ourself is treating others with dignity and respect, not as objects to be controlled, possessed, used, and discarded.

What Jesus says about adultery has parallels to his interpretation of regulations regarding divorce: "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." In Jesus' time, a man could divorce his wife on a whim, for no cause, simply by giving her a certificate of divorce. At least part of what Jesus is doing is condemning the patriarchal practices of his day in which a man had absolute power over his wife. Such capricious actions certainly had profound impacts on the lives of others: of the wife, but also on any children, who could be left destitute and homeless.

While things are different now, and either party can initiate divorce in our own time, Jesus' intent is still applicable in a broader respect of recognizing that marriage is a partnership. That both parties are to be viewed and treated as equals. Even Jesus recognizes that there are certainly situations in which divorce may be warranted. But in general terms, that would be an action of last resort, after other attempts at reconciliation are exhausted. The broader implication for our own relationships, be they marriage or any other, being that all parties are to be viewed and treated as equals, with dignity and respect.

Regarding oaths, Jesus says, "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven . . . or by the earth . . . Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one." This is in direct reference to the third of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not take the Name of the Lord your God in vain." This is not merely a commandment, as is often thought, against using God's name in cussing. Rather, it has broader implications about how God's name is invoked in a variety of circumstances. The essence is that we are not to abuse the name of the Lord through false or vain use. That we are not to falsely invoke the name of God in an oath. That we are not to swear something on the name of God when it is not true or when we do not intend to follow through. Since serious or significant oaths were made by invoking the name of God—which we still do today—breaking such an oath is considered blasphemous and dishonoring the name of God. Of dishonoring God's very being. Certainly not in keeping with the commandment to love God. Certainly not contributing to healthy relationship with God. But even with respect to loving our neighbor and seeking healthy communal relationships, Jesus is saying that a community that is in right relationship, and individuals within that community, do not need to resort to oaths that can be used evasively, that leave room for renegeing. Such is not conducive to healthy relationship, individual or communal.

Some interpret Jesus' words in today's Gospel to be him raising the bar, of making the Law more restrictive. Which is actually the farthest things from what Jesus wants. The common

theme in all of the examples Jesus cites, and why he chose these four out of all the possible commandments, is that he is seeking to reclaim the original spirit of the Law. Recognizing that the intent of God's laws was and is primarily to foster right relationship with God and with one another. That in our relationships we need to strive to be as open and expansive as possible. To be willing to not just adhere to the letter of the law, but to be open to seeing and living according to the spirit of the law—to God's purpose for giving the Law in the first place. The spirit of the law that Jesus sought to expand as a way of further fulfilling the Law as God intended it to be practiced. The spirit of the law being defined by the overarching commandments to love God and to love neighbor. With the purpose that the laws were never meant to be onerous and restrictive, but rather to be expansive and nurturing of our relationships with God and with one another. Laws, that when lived and followed in the fullness of what God intended, allows us individually and communally to choose life in its fullest sense.