

Matthew 5: 21-27

Today's gospel is closely linked with last week's where Jesus said he had come to fulfill the law. I talked about Jesus bringing a creative synthesis. Rather than teaching prescriptive legalism about what must be done and what must be avoided, he called for people to act out of love of God and mercy.

The Old Testament stories tell of God's law given to Moses, that called people to obedience. The Law prescribed a way of life based in generosity. If humankind had been able to submit to the rules which acknowledged dignity in the other, our world would be a different place.

Of course, the problem we face in this life is the divisiveness in the human heart. We all know about the unsettling desires that reside there. At times we want to stand out, we want to be different, we want to achieve more. Jesus knew this propensity in the human heart. His encouragement to his contemporaries and us is to change the nature of our inner world. Jesus took old commandments and raised them to a new level. His teaching then and now is to examine thoughts and feelings that might lead us to violate the commandments which are actually about treating others with dignity.

Jesus sets the bar high when he says he has not come to abolish but fulfill the law and in today's gospel he broadens the notion of right behaviour.

The teachings are no longer 'do not murder' or 'do not commit adultery'. Those statements become doorways to examination internal dynamics as well as external behaviours. While you and I may not murder or commit adultery, we might harbour attitudes from a list such as this: anger, jealousy, slander, false generosity, arrogance, and lust. The possibilities are endless. We may not want to acknowledge the darker thoughts that make up part of the inner world, Jesus knew about them.

Those of you who have spent time in therapy as I have, know that psychologists make a distinction between feeling emotions and acting on them. We can know we are angry or jealous but we can contain our behaviour. Psychologists urge us to look to the inner world and to name what we see there. If we own our feelings, we can then make decisions about how to act based in self-awareness. If truth be told, wrangling our personal responses and curbing our wayward nature is a challenge for each of us. So how honest can we be about self before God?

Perhaps the whole project of examining the inner world just seems too difficult. We could respond in one of two ways when we hear Jesus' voice in the gospel. We could throw our hands in the air and say that Jesus' standards are impossible, and as long as our behaviour upholds community standards we are doing ok. Another approach is to accept our sinfulness our flaws and allow ourselves to fall into the arms of the living

God. If we can acknowledge our guilt in our internal world, we trust in the work of God's grace to bring us forgiveness and a clean slate. This second way—trusting in God's grace—is the basis of New Testament teaching that makes clear that our only hope is the grace of God. When we fail to contain our inner darkness and it becomes manifest in our behaviour, we can take heart because God's grace can bring change.

Jesus calls on us to reconcile with our brother or sister so that good feelings—Godly feelings—will overcome the evil in our hearts. Once our hearts are right, we are capable of better responses to our neighbour and even to our enemies.

This section of the sermon on the Mount really calls us to look into the feelings that prompt our behaviour. We are called to do this because Jesus promotes a radical notion of righteousness. It is hinted at in the beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the pure in heart, these are blessed not because they are exemplars of the law, but because of their inward orientation of the heart. Jesus brings a new vision of the Kingdom of God. It is much more than following rules. It requires surrender to God and neighbour.

When we know disturbance in the heart we are ready to be changed. If you and I stay in the thinking realm, with ideas and rules we will not be

prepared to see God's righteousness. When we feel pain and distress, when we're in the place of vulnerability then we are capable of change.

God's plan in sending Jesus into the world was to teach us about re-ordering relationships. For that to happen, we have to re-orient the internal landscapes of our lives. The good news is that we have help! We've just celebrated the birth of Jesus. God born in a humble manger comes to us in the messiness of life in all its dimensions. God's purpose is healing and he understands struggle.

Reconciliation to self and others is our life's work. Jesus did not call us to a check-list of acceptable behaviours. We are called to a deepening-life. One where there are demands and promises as well.

Here is a beautiful explanation of by Jan Richardson about travelling in the darkness to find grace.

Go slow

If you can.

Slower.

More slowly still

Friendly dark

or fearsome,

this is no place

To break your neck

by rushing,

by running,

by crashing into

what you cannot see.

Then again,

it is true:

different darks

have different tasks,

and if you have arrived here unawares,

if you have come

in peril

or in pain,

this might be no place for you to dawdle.

I do not know

what these shadows

ask of you,

What they might hold

that means you good

or ill.

It is not for me

to reckon

whether you should linger

or you should leave.

But this is what

I can ask for you:

That in the darkness

there be a blessing.

That in the shadows

there be a welcome.

That in the night

you be encompassed

by the Love that knows

Your name.

Thanks be to God.

Reference

Oden, A G. *Sixth Sunday After Epiphany Commentary* Matthew 5: 21-37

www

Richardson, J. *Circle of Grace* Warton Gospeller Press Florida 2015

poem