

Epiphany 6, Year A  
Matthew 5:21-37  
February 12, 2017  
Bill Ellis

Every time I read today's gospel I end up saying "you lost me there, Jesus." Being threatened with Hell for saying something mildly insulting, identified as an adulterer, and advised to maim myself, do not endear the speaker to me or to whatever point the speaker is trying to make, even when that speaker is Jesus. Of course personally I don't believe the speaker is Jesus, except in the strictly literary sense. Matthew found these statements somewhere, perhaps in the tradition, perhaps within his own marvelous spiritual imagination, and combined them into a single speech he assigned to Jesus. Nevertheless, Matthew would not, and I believe did not, combine them arbitrarily; there had to be some way these sayings are related thematically, and that is the problem I have spent a lot of time trying to solve, for the most part without being satisfied with my solution or the solutions of the scholars whose work I have read in an effort to figure this whole thing out.

I don't believe, as I once did, that these sayings constitute an impossible standard God knows is impossible, but imposes on us anyway to force us to accept God's grace. That is a nice Lutheran way of thinking about them, but I am not Lutheran. Nor do I think they are about any sort of absolute devotion to God, as I have suggested in other sermons I am now embarrassed to realize I

preached. Rather, I now imagine that this collection is united thematically around what a true and authentic relationship with people really means. Roughly, taken together these sayings suggest that in life with people, the rules are not really enough. What is required is a deep and abiding respect for the dignity and worth of everyone, regardless of what the rules say. Consider each of the seven sayings with this thematic possibility in mind.

A murderer is answerable to the law, but oddly, to insult someone, which is not a violation of any law, is to be liable to hell. Reconciliation with others is not a result of making offerings to God, but a pre-condition of any valid offering to God. Here the Jesus of this text follows the prophetic line declaring that ritual without justice and mercy is valueless, since it is justice and mercy that God desires from us. Objectifying a woman by making her an object of sexual fantasy is the same as adultery, even though there is no law against it, even if the woman never realizes she has been so objectified. The divorce teaching makes this more explicit. Women had no right to divorce in ancient Israel because a marriage was a property exchange between two men, the groom and the father of the bride. Divorce was the sole prerogative of the man because the woman was property. Here we see that regardless of what the law says women are real human beings with the same rights in a marriage as men enjoy. They are not property and may not be treated as such. Most remarkable is the hyperbole in the statement about plucking out eyes and cutting off hands and feet. Even our bodies, this statement seems to say, are not more important than our respect for other people

or God. It is better to lose body parts than to use body parts to break relationships. Finally, don't swear oaths, for you shouldn't need to. Let the integrity of your dealings with others be such that people can rely upon your "yes" or your "no."

I suppose at a literal level some - but not all - of these statements could be read as a standard that can't be met, even though we have to try anyway. I simply don't see the point in that. If someone were to give me a task we both know is utterly impossible, but insist I do it anyway, that would not cause me to try, and certainly it would not cause me to love such a master. On the contrary, I would not trust that master at all, and would seek instead to find a new one whose expectations actually took my capacities into consideration. People improve by being told to do the difficult; they don't improve by being told to do what everyone knows is impossible.

That is why I believe we need to look more deeply and see the extent to which this is not about attempting the impossible, but rather is a remarkable way to call our attention to what truly matters to God, how we treat ourselves and others. So notice that in none of these cases does Jesus say the rules don't matter. In all of these cases the clear implication is that the rules are never an excuse to mistreat or abuse people, even - perhaps especially where - people could become abusive and predatory without breaking them. That I believe is at the heart of this whole passage.

It is always possible to use the rules to avoid noticing the way people dehumanize each other routinely. Yes, for example, I think some person is a stupid jerk who doesn't deserve any consideration at all, but there is nothing illegal about thinking that, and besides, he deserves to be held in contempt. Most of us find ourselves thinking that sort of thing about another person at least periodically, and quite often feel sort of virtuous about it. And it feels harmless because no one got physically assaulted, run off the road, or anything of the sort.

Objectifying people is really common, and it isn't just about sexual fantasy. I go to the cashier at the grocery store and I see an object whose only utility is to get me out of that store with the stuff I wish to purchase as quickly as possible. That is fine if the object is a self-checkout machine, but what about if that object is a genuine living, breathing human being? It feels the same to most of us, at least some of the time, even though that feeling does not usually rise to consciousness. And equally it feels harmless. We aren't breaking any rules, we aren't doing anything wrong in the eyes of the law or our society by failing to notice the dignity and humanity of a grocery store checker. This fact is nearly always sufficient to protect people from even noticing what they are doing. But if you talk to checkers when they are not on duty, and ask them about their job, it becomes clear very quickly that they can tell the difference between those who recognize their humanity, and those who don't.

I am convinced that is a big hunk of what is going on here today. In a seven-fold repetition the Jesus of this passage exposes the way people use the

laws, the rules, to remain unconscious of the damage done by failing to honor the essential dignity of all people. This passage isn't demanding that we aspire to an impossible standard, it is pointing out to us that one of the things that really matters in life – really matters to God – is the essential worth, value, dignity, of everyone we ever meet. It is a value so high, so essential in the economy of God, that even the rules by which we live are not sufficient to safeguard that dignity. We are called in this text, as elsewhere throughout scripture, to apply a higher standard than what the rules require. So, though it doesn't sound like it, this text is consistent in spirit with the way lots of Rabbis, including Jesus, summarized the meaning of the whole Law and Prophets: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

No organized society can long endure without laws, rules – both written and unwritten – social norms and standards. They are not necessary evils, they are positive goods, though like any good thing they can be abused. One way to read the strange and convoluted passage that constitutes our gospel lesson today reveals an often unnoticed perspective on the laws, rules and social norms by which we live. The heart of that perspective declares that there is plenty of room within the confines of our laws and rules to dehumanize people, and therefore it is possible to use the undoubted fact of being law abiding people who live within our social norms to hide from the ways in which disrespect and dehumanization

occur. That insight makes this an important passage, because this is something we need to know. Spiritual growth can't occur without self-awareness; to get this chance to notice how it is possible to hide from ourselves through our very goodness, through our very dedication to making sure we obey the rules, is an important step in that self-awareness that opens us to real growth in the Spirit. So this time, instead of saying "you lost me there, Jesus," I find myself reading this lesson and saying "you got me there, Jesus."

