

**A Sermon by Mr. Jonathan Pucik**  
**The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Sunday, February 16, 2020**

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Psalm 119:1-8

Matthew 5:21-37

Have you ever had to get up from a movie at the theater for a trip to the restroom or a popcorn refill only to return and find that you missed an incredibly crucial scene? Or maybe you simply fell asleep like I did watching the dystopian film *V for Vendetta*? On three different occasions, I've tried to watch that film, and I can't recommend it or even tell you what it's actually about, because it puts me to sleep every time. I drift off at some quiet moment during the middle when Natalie Portman's character still has hair, and then I wake up to this massive explosion set to Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* and Natalie Portman with a shaved head, and I have no idea how we got from point A to point B.

I say this, because sometimes our weekly lectionary readings can play the same sort of trick on us. Even if we remember last week's readings, we often show up to church and experience a kind of whiplash as we're thrown smack dab into the middle of a story or discourse with no idea how we got there or where we are going. Such may be the case for today's feisty section of Matthew, and some context is needed in order to wade through these radical and at times hyperbolic words from Jesus.

You may have been struck by the thought that the road rage you experienced on the way to church this morning or every morning makes you liable to hellfire, or perhaps you were horrified by the idea of people gouging out their eyes or cutting off their hands to prevent themselves from sinning. More seriously, those who have been through the pain of such a thing like divorce will find Jesus' fiery admonition against the remarriage of a divorcee unsettling, perhaps even heartbreaking. And lastly, what is Jesus' problem with swearing an oath, anyways, and why is that anything more promising than a simple "yes" or "no" comes from the evil one? Even among the most ardent members of the Christian faith, no one seems to be enacting the whole of Jesus' words in a literal sense, but where does the line fall between the literal and the figurative? Are we all condemned by our failure to live into this moral vision?

It would help in our inquiry to know that these four paragraphs are - believe it or not - part of Jesus' most memorable sermon on the mount, and they're introduced by a statement we heard in last week's reading: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets...but to fulfill them." Whereas in ancient times Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai that was to be strictly upheld by God's people, Jesus now stands on His own mount not to contradict or dismantle, but to fulfill that law. Jesus does not leave the moral vision of

Christianity to abstraction. You want to be salt of the earth? You want to be a light in this world? Well, here's how you do it. Far from implying that righteous living does not matter, Jesus offers in each section of today's message a one-up on the original law. It's a clear formula: a report on the ancient law, "you have heard it was said," followed by an infinitely more demanding standard, "but I tell you." You have heard not to commit murder - sure - but I tell you that anger holds the same danger. You have heard not to commit adultery, but I tell you that you have sinned simply by looking upon another with lust in your heart. Each movement exceeds the ancient law in its demand, and it is exactly the moral vision that Jesus wants to paint. It's a vision of righteousness, unsubdued and in excess, unable to be tempered by the loopholes that are bound to come when following a list of rules.

I think it's at least partially why Jesus warns against something as complicated as divorce and as simple as promises, for we humans have an uncanny ability to manipulate covenantal bonds and business contracts to serve our own selves, and often at the detriment of those most vulnerable in our midst. You might remember, to divorce a woman in the first century was to render her without any economic stability or protection, and Jesus' warning is not to the women but to the men who might for one reason or another casually leave their spouses to the streets, failing to care for them. If you'll notice, each command from today's text is concerned with our disposition and relationship toward each other. If we were to keep reading, we would find that later on in Matthew, a pharisee asks Jesus, "which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replies, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' [and] 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

For Matthew, righteousness ultimately boils down to something as simple and insurmountable as this: loving God and loving our neighbors. What are we to make of this in the messes of our own lives? I can only speak for myself, but even when I am beaming in my Sunday best, I am given over to an array of human imperfections in my inner life. Even when I am trying endlessly to live a holy existence, I am prone to self-centeredness. I lose my patience and become angry toward those I love most. I forget birthdays. I do good things at times, but often only so that people will like me, and sometimes I do good things just so that I will like myself. I have walked past the homeless person on the street when I had money in my wallet that was a gift from someone else. The list goes on, but the point is that the perfect righteousness of God is radically and infinitely demanding, and it will not be satisfied by my feeble attempts to attain it. Yet the words of Jesus' sermon on the mount still resound: "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Where is our hope if we cannot do this on our own? I believe that our hope can be found, if not in our own righteousness, then in the righteousness of God who comes to transform the human heart. The New Testament scholar George Eldon Ladd writes, "The righteousness required for entrance into the future realm of God's Kingdom is the righteousness which results from God's reign in our lives. The Kingdom of God gives to us that which it demands; otherwise, we could not attain it." We are made righteous not by our works, but by the grace of

the living God who through Christ is doing a more powerful work in us. Jesus comes to fulfill the law, and with its fulfillment to establish the reign of God in our hearts, in our neighborhoods, and in this world. Through His incarnate life, death, and resurrection, His righteousness is made our own and His reign established. He does not rule by enforcing a preconceived list of do's and don't's, but by the transformation and sanctification of the human heart.

This moral vision of the Kingdom of God is not simply intended to reveal to us our ineptitude. The Sermon on the Mount can be a lens by which we look for and are called into the reign of God in the world. Where there is care for the most vulnerable members of our neighborhood, the kingdom of God is at hand. Where there is reconciliation in the wake of conflict and violence, the reign of God is sighted. When we show fidelity and tenderness toward those closest to us, we are showing signs of the reign of God in our life and in our relationships. This reign of God is a gift of grace, not a punitive legal system, but an opportunity to become human in its truest and fullest sense. We are called to this work, not out of obligation, but as a response to grace freely given. In a sermon, the 20th century theologian Karl Barth writes of this natural response, that the task for the one raptured by the grace of God is simply, "to believe, to accept, to let it be true for us, to begin to live with this truth, to believe it not only with our minds and with our lips, but also with our hearts and with all our life, that our fellowmen may sense it, and finally to let our total existence be immersed in the great divine truth, *by grace you have been saved...*"

Take these words of Jesus, not as an implication of guilt only, but an invitation to live more fully into a grace which has already been extended to you. Let that grace be true for you, and allow God to reign in and through your life. Proclaim in word and deed the closing sentence of our morning prayer office, the language drawn from a praise of St. Paul who knows a thing or two about the righteousness of God: "Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus, for ever and ever."