



Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

The Rev. Glenda Empsall, St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Coeur d'Alene, ID 2020

Lord, who caused **all** holy Scriptures to be written for our **learning**: Grant us so to **hear** them, **read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest** them, that we may **embrace** and **ever hold fast** the blessed **hope** of everlasting **life**...

When Father **David** and I were scheduling **preaching** duties, I said Feb **16th** would work for me... and **then** we looked at the Gospel lesson for today. **Whoa!** “**This** is a **hard** teaching. **Who** can **accept** it?” [John 6:60]

We **know** that Jesus often **exaggerated** to make a **point**. “**You** have **heard** it said... But **I** say to you...” **What** does Jesus say in **this** Gospel reading and **how** do we **interpret** that in **our** context? Part of the ‘**problem**’ of course is in the **words** and how they were **understood** in the **first** century versus how **we** translate and **interpret** them **now**.

I think it is **essential** for understanding Jesus’ **teachings** and the **Gospel** to remember that **Jesus** was a Palestinian **Jew** who **grew** up and began his **ministry** under the **powerful**, oppressive **occupation** of the Roman **Empire**. We must **not** “separate the **reality** of the **world** from the **reality** of the **Bible** by preaching a ‘**cheap** gospel’ that neither **challenges** reality nor is **challenged** by it. I **cannot** preach a ‘**cheap** gospel’ -- **discipleship** is **costly** and **text** without **context** is **dangerous!**”¹ [Plug for EfM]

In **last** week’s gospel [Mt 5:13-20] Jesus says, “Do **not** think that I have come to **abolish** the **law** or the **prophets**; I have come **not** to abolish but to **fulfill**. Truly I tell you, until **heaven** and **earth** pass away, not **one** letter, not one **stroke** of a letter, will pass from the **law** until **all** is **accomplished**.”

¹ *Mitri Raheb, a Palestinian Christian, author, and Lutheran pastor who lives and works in Bethlehem. This context offers him a unique way of knowing and interpreting the Gospel, one that we in the West can certainly learn from. CAC, 2-11-2020 – Richard Rohr.*

Laws are **guidance** for the **way** we are to live **together** in **community**. Laws are **supposed** to make us **accountable** when we break the **rules**; make us **responsible** for our own **actions**.

At the beginning of the **Rite I** service, the Priest says, “**Hear** what our Lord Jesus Christ **saith**: Thou shalt **love** the Lord thy **God** with all thy **heart**, and with all thy **soul**, and with all thy **mind**. This is the **first** and great **commandment**. And the **second** is like unto it: Thou shalt **love** thy **neighbor** as **thyself**. On **these two commandments** hang **all the Law** and the **Prophets**.”

You will **remember** the Pharisee-lawyer who asked Jesus a **question** to **test** him, “Teacher, **which** commandment in the **law** is the **greatest**?” and Jesus said to him, “‘You shall **love** the Lord your **God** with all your **heart**, and with all your **soul**, and with all your **mind**.’ **This** is the **greatest** and **first** commandment. And a **second** is like it: ‘**You** shall **love** your **neighbor** as **yourself**.’ On **these two commandments** hang **all the law** and the **prophets**.” [Mt 22:34-40]

If we truly **loved** as **Jesus** loved; as **God** loves **us**, the **rest** of the laws would be **unnecessary**!

“You shall not **murder**.” Jesus pointed to a **root** cause for **murder**. **Hate** and **anger** could lead to **murder** and is therefore subject to **God’s** judgment for the **intention** as well as for the **act** of **murder**. “So 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**.”

“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**.” **Yet**, when the **Scribes** and **Pharisees** brought a woman caught in the **act** of adultery to Jesus, **quoting** the law of **Moses** which demanded **stoning**, Jesus said, “Let **anyone** among you who is **without** sin throw the **first** stone at her.” When they **heard** it, they went **away**, leaving Jesus **alone** with the **woman**. Jesus asked, “Where **are** they? Has **no** one **condemned** you?” She replied, “**No** one, sir.” And **Jesus** said, “**Neither** do **I** condemn you. **Go**, and do not **sin** again.” [John 8:3-11]

“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, causes **her** to commit **adultery**; and whoever **marries** a **divorced** woman commits **adultery**.” Sorry -- Most **New** Testament scholars **agree** that Jesus **opposed** divorce. Why? Because in Jesus’ time, in the male-dominated world, a divorced woman would be in the street, forced into begging or prostitution. For people **today** who are in **loveless** or **abusive** relationships, yet want to be biblically **faithful**, what **Jesus** said, and what Jesus **meant**, are **crucial**.

Amy Jill-Levine asks, “Do **Jesus’** comments on **divorce**... respond to a **specific** situation, or are they **universal** injunctions?” **Jewish** and **Roman** views of marital **legalities** were distinct: **Jews** practiced **polygamy**; **Romans** did **not**; Jews **contracted** marriages via a **legal** writ, and obtained **divorce** via **another** legal writ. Legally, **Roman** citizens had **no** difficulty **divorcing**. All that was **needed** was the desire of husband **or** wife to **end** the **relationship** – and the dowry had to be repaid. **Roman** culture **valued** marriage and considered **divorce**, at best, “**regrettable**.”

Some **Pharisees** came to Jesus, and to **test** him asked, “Is it **lawful** for a man to **divorce** his wife...?” He answered, “Have **you** not read that the **One** who **made** them at the **beginning** ‘made them **male** and **female**,’ and said, ‘... the **two** shall become **one** flesh’? So they are no longer **two**, but **one**. Therefore what **God** has joined together, let **no** one **separate**.” They asked, “**Why** then did **Moses** command us to give a certificate of **dismissal** to **divorce** her?” Jesus replied, “...because **you** were so hard-hearted, **Moses** allowed you to **divorce**, but from the **beginning** it was **not** so. And **I** say to you, whoever **divorces** and marries **another** commits **adultery**.” [Mt 19:3-9]

[Personal story]

“Let **anyone** among you who is **without** sin be the **first** to throw the **stone**...

O Great **Love**, thank you for **living** and **loving** in us and **through** us. May **all** that we do flow from our deep **connection** with **you** and **all** beings. **Help** us become a **community** that vulnerably **shares** each other’s **burdens**. **Listen** to our hearts’ **longings** for the **healing** of our world. **Knowing** you are **hearing** us **better** than we are **speaking**, we **offer** these **prayers** in all the holy names of God. **Amen**.