

A Couple of Jots and a Tittle

Year A, Epiphany 6 – Matthew 5:20-37

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, February 16, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Did you catch it? I know you did. I *saw* you all looking at your little bulletin inserts there for a moment, trying to figure out where I was getting the first bit of this morning's Gospel reading. The rules for preachers using the Lectionary say that it's okay to expand the readings, so I took the liberty of reaching back to the verse *before* today's reading, which happens to be the last sentence of *last* week's Gospel. (It's also okay to *reduce* the readings, but you won't catch me doing *that* very often.) Anyway, normally I think the framers of the Lectionary get it pretty much right, dividing the lessons in such a way that they make a lot of sense, and can guide us all into a fuller idea of the real Gospel of Christ. But as I studied the disturbing sayings of this week's portion, I became more and more convinced that to understand what Jesus is actually saying here, one needs to be looking at it through the right lens, and that lens is the disturbing saying at the end of last week's portion, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

It's not that we don't know this portion of Matthew. I suspect that as I began reading it, at least some of you were already saying to yourselves, "Oh, here it comes. It's *that* one again." We know these sayings well enough that we might even get to the point where we say, "Let's just file this one away as Jesus getting carried away." There are even scholars and preachers who look at this portion of Matthew and say, "That can't be what Jesus really said. This kind of rigidity just doesn't fit with the rest of Jesus' agenda, it just doesn't square with the trajectory of his mission." Jesus, after all, was all about thumbing his nose at the religious establishment. Jesus was about breaking the yoke of their endless rules and regulations and red tape. Jesus was about lifting the burden that had been made of the Law by... well, by the scribes and the Pharisees.

And yet here he is, telling his listeners, and us, that not only are we condemned for our actions, but for the thoughts of our hearts as well. I am condemned not only for my violent and thieving hands and my lying, back-biting tongue, but by the anger in my gut, and the lust in my heart, and the deceit of my mind. And Jesus *starts* the indictment by saying, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

The Law says that we are guilty of not living as God requires. God is by definition both righteous and just. We know from creation and from the Law and from the prophets what we are to do to be righteous, and yet time and again we do precisely the opposite. We are guilty. We know it, and God knows it, and the just penalty for such blatant, willful, cosmic violation... is death. The penalty is death, and justice demands that the penalty be paid.

The Law says that we are slaves to sin, that we have sold ourselves into bondage from which we cannot break free. We don't belong to ourselves and our every action points out that we do not belong to God. We are enslaved by something else, outside ourselves and outside God. Maybe we call it sin, maybe we call it death, maybe we put some hideous face on it and call it the devil, but we are chained in a way that is very simply impossible to do what we know we ought to do, to refrain from doing what we know we ought *not* to do.

The Law says that we have turned our back on our relationship with our Creator and no longer have any claim to his love. We might try to tell ourselves that we just strayed away like little lost sheep, that we deserve a second chance, or maybe even a third. But we know that we have "strayed away" so purposefully, and so insistently, and so *often*, that there is no hope that we can *ever* find our way back to the one who made us for love itself.

The Law says that restitution, *reparation* is required for sin against the Almighty One. Since the beginning, the form of that required repayment is the shedding of blood, if not the blood of the sinner his-

or her-self, than the blood of some sacrifice, some symbol big enough to symbolize the enormity of the breach created by the offense. And the accumulated guilt of just my life, or just yours, or just anyone conscious enough to place our own needs and desires above those of our neighbor, our own will above those of our Creator is enough to drown the altar of the Temple itself.

The Law says that every generation of humankind has participated and participates in the sin of that first generation in the Garden. Simply by partaking of the same humanity as the first man, we are each of us part and parcel of his sin. With our very breath, as well as our own actions, we are participants in every affront, and every disgrace, and every outrage since that first bite of pride.

And Jesus said, “Unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” So where does that leave us?

Maybe... maybe we need to go back just a little further into last week’s portion of this same Gospel story. Maybe we need to take just another step back into what Jesus was saying, *before* he pointed out that as broken and rotten and *unrighteous* our every action is, the human heart is quite capable, indeed seemingly irresistibly *compelled* to operate *contrary* to righteousness. “Do not think,” Jesus said, having just reminded his listeners, and *us*, that we are salt that is worthless if we lose our flavor, that we are light that is useless if we hide ourselves away, “Do not think that I have come to *abolish* the law or the prophets,” he said, “I have come not to abolish, but to *fulfill*.” Ah, there it is! “I have come not to abolish the Law,” Jesus said, “but to fulfill it.” Right there, right *there* is the reason I can look at the indictments of this week’s portion of the Gospel and not try to sweep it under the rug, or go hide under a rock. Right *there* is the Good News. We are justified, you see, in the sight of God, we are declared and *made* righteous in every way that means *anything*, not by the *abolition* of the Law, but *by* the Law’s *fulfilment*.

The Law said that we are guilty, and the penalty must be paid. And from the cross, Jesus says that he has taken our place, your place and mine. Our debt has been fulfilled... as in, paid in *full*... and no power can say otherwise. *That* is substitutionary atonement.

The Law said that we are slaves, bound to repeat and repeat and repeat our paces and patterns of self-accusation, and self-loathing, and self-defeat. And from the cross, Jesus says that by his sinless sacrifice, he himself has bought us back from the slavery into which we sold ourselves, and set us free. That is the theology of redemption.

The Law said that we irreparably broke our relationship with God long ago when we hid ourselves in the cool of the evening when he came to find us. And from the cross, Jesus finds us *anyway*. In one moment of self-giving love, the gap, the *chasm* that we had opened between ourselves and our Creator was bridged and God has found us and finds us moment by moment by moment. That is reconciliation.

The Law demanded a sacrifice of blood. And from the cross, Jesus pours out his own and completes the parade of spotless livestock, the sacrifice of go-betweens and stand-ins and scape-goats. That is what scholars and preachers are talking about, when they talk about atonement.

The Law said that since we all participate in the sin of Adam, we all participate in his death. Yet from the cross, Jesus shouted, “It... is... finished.” And bursting from the cold, dark prison of death on the third day, he crushed the power of death, not just for himself, but for the whole of Adam’s race. By my baptism, and by his Body and Blood, and by his promise that he will never leave me, I am not only part of the death of Adam, I am part and parcel of the everlasting life of Jesus Christ! And that participation is a whole ‘nother kind of justification.

“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees,” Jesus said, “you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Fortunately, that was just *after* he said that “until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until *all* is accomplished.” Every jot. Every tittle. *He* has paid it all. All to *him* I owe.