Practice of Faith is a Serious Matter

February 12, 2017 – 6th Sunday After Epiphany

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

Full Texts” http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=18

That’s quite a bill of particulars Jesus lays out in these verses from the Sermon on the Mount!

For that matter, the passage from Deuteronomy includes both threat and promise, and Paul’s words to the church in Corinth seem to judge matters pretty strictly.

All three passages speak out of a frame of reference that goes against the spirit of our age and, I suspect the age in which they were originally written. We want our religion to be a matter of positive affirmation, and here we find conditions attached. We want our faith to be a matter of “having our hearts in the right place,” and here we find that actions count as well. We hope that in the last analysis God will see our good intentions, and here we find that God sees through our rationalizations and self-justifications.

What kind of “Good News” – Gospel – is that?

The short answer is that it’s actually the best kind of good news we could hope to find, because in these passages we see the hand of a God who loves us, not in the manner of a sentimental Valentines’ card, but in the manner of Someone who really cares about us – cares enough to point out our rationalizations and self-deceptions, enough to show us that the seeds of disaster are buried deep in the seemingly mundane details of our daily life.

You didn’t kill that guy who disrespected you? Good for you, but do you think about it, day and night and spend time building up a decisive case against him, so that you write off his humanity?

You didn’t go off and rent a motel room with that person whose charms make you fantasize day and night? Good for you, but what does that rich fantasy life leave you thinking about the spouse you vowed to love, honor and cherish?

You hold your brother (or insert: neighbor, co-worker, cousin, friend, acquaintance) in total contempt? A good idea to try and settle a few of those matters as part of your preparation for Holy Communion.
“Hold on, hold on,” I hear you say. “How can anyone live up to all of these things, and for that matter to all the rest of the Sermon on the Mount? Isn’t the Gospel about grace and forgiveness?”

It surely is, but a big part of that is coming to the place where we acknowledge that we need forgiveness in the first place, and getting there requires that we see the importance of the details of our daily lives. We have a habit of supposing that God is only interested in the big things: the assault we actually commit, the thing we actually steal, the lie we actually tell, the vow we actually break. And of course, God is interested in those things, but also wants us to understand that they are based in the details of what we call our inner lives. I’ve never heard of anyone who sets out in life with the ambition to become a murderer, a thief, an adulterer, a perjurer – those acts originate somewhere, and that “somewhere” is the world of casual thoughts and careless behavior.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus paints for us a picture of the kind of persons into which he intends to change us. In the Kingdom, he would have us know, there is simply no place for the behaviors and the attitudes that govern so much of our world. It’s not that you couldn’t steal from someone, but that you simply wouldn’t.

He is not trying to make us become nicer people; he will settle for nothing less than turning us into a new kind of person. It’s really all or nothing. “Come to me as you are,” he says, “and I will make you into the kind of creature my Father intended you to be in the first place.”

But, Lord, can’t you just take away some of my ugly traits and leave the rest of me alone?

“No, child, there is no ‘rest of you.’”

The Sermon on the Mount is all about portraying what that world of new persons will look like, and it also exposes the kinds of things that will have no place in it.

N.T. Wright, in his book, *After You Believe*, describes the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount. According to Wright, the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount are not *mere laws or rules of behavior*. Jesus did not set forth his teaching to be taken in a legalistic sense, that by behaving this way, we will gain rewards from God.

> “God’s future is arriving in the present, in the person and work of Jesus, and you can practice, right now, the habits of life which will find their goal in that coming future.” (p. 103)
Nor, Wright would say, are the verses of the Sermon, *Mere instructions to believers*. Jesus did not present his teaching as, “I’m doing my work, and now that you believe in me, here are the works you must do in response.”

Instead, Wright puts Jesus’ instructions in the Sermon in their proper salvation-historical context.

> “What Jesus is saying, rather, is, “Now that I’m here, God’s new world is coming to birth; and, once you realize that, you’ll see that these are the habits of heart which anticipate that new world here and now.” These qualities: purity of heart, mercy, and so on are not, so to speak, “things you have to do” to earn a “reward,” a “payment.” Nor are they merely the “rules of conduct” laid down for new converts to follow…They are, in themselves, the signs of life, the language of life, the life of new creation, the life of new covenant, the life which Jesus came to bring.” (p. 106)

In other words, Jesus is describing in the simple, earthy language of everyday, what everyday in the Kingdom will be like. He is, in effect, saying to us, “When you see people living like this, it’s a sign to you that the Kingdom is near. And when you yourself begin to live like this, you will know that you are becoming a true citizen of the Kingdom.”

That’s what a sign does: it points beyond itself to something greater or, if you will, more real.

When, with the writer of Deuteronomy, you begin to see the Commandments as a guidepost for which you are grateful, you may know that you have chose the way of life.

When you stop worrying about whether Paul, or Apollos, or some other servant of God is the greatest, you can know that you’re beginning to grow closer to the God who sent all of them out to spread the Kingdom.

When you learn to respect the humble, the merciful, the peacemaker, the ones who yearn for justice, you can know that you’re beginning to understand the Kingdom.

When these things happen in your life, they are signs that you’re moving out of the destructive patterns that govern so much of human history, and that you will yourself be able to announce the nearness of the coming Kingdom. When we do that as a church, we take on the calling that God has for us to be an outpost, making the Kingdom just a little closer, and allowing God to move through us to his ultimate glory in which we, remarkably, have a place and a purpose.