



Choose Life

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given February 12, 2017
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany: Matthew 5:21-37*

How many of you have heard of the Lectionary? How many of you have no idea what the lectionary is? For those who are unfamiliar, the lectionary is a set schedule of readings from the Bible that are read on Sundays and from which preachers preach. If you go to a Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, or Catholic church, you are very likely to hear the same reading being read on any given Sunday. The lectionary takes about three years to get through most of the Bible. My point is that whoever is preaching on any given Sunday does not get to pick the texts he or she is going to preach about.

So when I was looking at the texts for today, and read today's gospel text, I groaned. Jesus in today's texts is teaching us like the good Jewish rabbi that he is—he is teaching us about the meaning of the laws he is asking his disciples to follow. But as I went through his list of instructions, I thought: impossible, impossible, impossible, impossible. We are not to murder anyone. OK, I think I can handle that one. But Jesus takes it further. He says, In ancient times you have heard you must not murder. But I tell you that when you are angry with someone and insult them or call them a fool, you have murdered them in your heart. Well, I must be guilty of murder then, for I have surely done each one of those things—especially since November 8 of last year. Then he says, if you look at someone with lust you have committed adultery in your heart. What can I say? On that point I think every red blooded human being of age in this room is guilty. Then he goes on to make it even worse, and says that many of the reasons people were getting divorced amounted to adultery. Well, I am personally divorced and remarried, so I guess that's strike three for me. And finally he tells us not to swear by anything, but to let our yes be yes, and our no be no. Be a person of your word who needs not rely on pinky promises or "swearing to God." So if any of us have ever failed to do what we said we would do, we're in trouble here as well. If the word "gospel" means "good news" -- Where is the good news in any of that?

I think we all know what Jesus is getting at. He is making the extraordinary claim that following him is not just about avoiding big picture ethical no-no's like literal murder or cheating on your spouse. It's about having utter integrity between one's inner and outer worlds. It's about avoiding hypocrisy at every level. It's about allowing the love of God to permeate us from the inside out and to perceive and think and speak and act only from that place. In a certain way, the picture Jesus is painting is very compelling—how beautiful it would be to be able to walk in this world with such consistency. I would love to be a person who never loses her temper or wrongs anyone, who unfailingly follows through with all of my verbal commitments every time, etc. But even though the picture of that person is compelling, it also sounds impossible. The truth is that we are inconsistent people who fluctuate between good and not-so-good motives. The truth is that we are constantly in need of healing and transformation and the love and grace of God.

Today's gospel text comes in the middle of three chapters in Matthew's gospel called the Sermon on the Mount. It's the longest continuous stretch of teachings by Jesus in the Bible. In it, as Adam reminded us last week, Jesus is teaching the Jewish law as a Jewish rabbi. And just before the verses we got in today's lectionary reading, Jesus said something extraordinary. He said, *you are the light of the world*. Not you should be the light of the world. Not, you must try very hard to be the light of the world. Not you have the light of the world. But you *are* the light of the world. What we need to understand is that when Jesus speaks these words, he is literally creating the reality

of them within us by his speech. Let me say that again. Christians understand Jesus to be God. And the God of Judeo-Christian tradition is a God who speaks things into being. Just like God said in the first chapter of the first book of the entire Bible, at the very beginning of Creation, “Let there be light – and there was light,” in the same way, when Jesus says *you are the light of the world*, he is creating the light within us that is the truest expression of who we are and how we are meant to live. That light that Jesus creates within us is a light that is meant to permeate every aspect of our inner world, and help us to see our relationships and our world in a new way. As one scholar commenting on this passage put it, “It is one thing to behave rightly. It is another thing entirely for one’s heart to be oriented toward love.”¹

And here’s the thing. We know it when there is a conflict between what someone is saying and doing, and what they really think and feel. Isn’t that what we mean by “Minnesota nice”? Even children can sniff hypocrisy from a mile away. Doing our best in our outer actions is good, but it’s no substitute for true conversion of heart and mind. I have a sister who lives in town, and at one period when we both had really young kids, I could tell that my sister was mad at me. She didn’t say she was mad at me—she is always polite and is a very gracious person, but I know her and I could tell that things were not right between us. Her mouth was smiling, but her eyes were cold. Have you ever experienced something like this? Eventually I invited her to coffee and just said that I knew something was up, and that I actually found it more painful for her to act nice to me when I could tell her heart wasn’t in it than for her to just come out and tell me where I had wronged her. We ended up having a great conversation where I had to hear some difficult things about ways I had been careless and disrespectful toward her, but we were telling the truth to each other in the context of a loving intention to make things right. This experience actually ended up strengthening our relationship because we learned we could trust each other enough to risk being honest, and to make amends when we had hurt each other.

My point in telling this story is that we are not doing anyone any favors by doing the right thing on the outside when what is inside us is off. People can tell when we are coming from a place of anger, or contempt, or disrespect, or hatred. What Jesus is saying in this text is that in the ordinary parts of our lives—in our relationships, our words, our vows to our spouses, and our promises—we are called to do more than just go through the motions of doing the right thing. He is inviting us to a total transformation from the inside out, a transformation where we are completely oriented toward love of God, love of neighbor. And what is it that empowers us to have that kind of transformation?

We cannot make that kind of transformation happen on our own. But we can open ourselves to the love of God in Christ that can heal us from the inside out. In the words from the text from Deuteronomy, we can choose life. We can choose to trust that God calls us blessed when we are poor in spirit, for the riches of God’s love can bring life and healing where we have only resentment and fear. The next time you catch yourself being polite on the outside when you’re experiencing war on the inside, ask yourself what transformation God might want to empower within you so that you might be freed to love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and so that you might be able to love your neighbor as yourself. Loving your neighbor as yourself might involve some respectful truth-telling, the need for some reconciliation. It might require us to stop going through the motions of what seems ethical and good on the outside when that does not match what is happening on the inside. Let us allow Christ to create light within us, so that we may live into our vocation as the light of the world. Amen.

¹ Amy Oden, “Commentary on Matthew 5:21-37,” in www.workingpreacher.com on February 13, 2011.