

Reconsider

Jesus shatters the myth of the certain faith

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

6th Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew 5:21-37

February 12, 2017

For the last month or so we've been talking about what goes into a new beginning. With baptism, we're invited to begin again. And with it, we're invited into following Christ, face adversity, respond, and claim our purpose.

Today, we focus on one of the least appreciated parts of our journey. Where we wrestle with the fact that we could be wrong.

This morning's gospel reading continues Jesus's preaching of the Sermon on the Mount. Where we first heard about how the blessing of God comes to those who most need to hear it. And last week we heard that Jesus didn't come to abolish the Law but to fulfil it. Keep that in mind.

Now we hear Jesus use the familiar sentence construction:"

"You have heard it said... but I say to you..."

And here is where we dig into what is most challenging and difficult about Jesus and his teaching.

He wants us to dig into the Law.

And we remember that when Jesus speaks of The Law, he's speaking of Torah, scripture, story, history, the foundation of the blessed community. He's not talking about Robert's Rules of Order or city ordinances. It isn't a handful of laws. He's talking about the foundation of the community.

So when we hear this construction

"You have heard it said... but I say to you..."

We must remember that Jesus came to fulfil the Law, not demolish, abolish, or disappear it. Jesus doesn't replace or remove. He digs into it. He goes deeper.

And when he does, he invites us to reconsider what we already know about it.

Snoopy, theologian.

One of the most astute comic strips of all time was a particular Peanuts strip told in four frames. Maybe you've seen it.



Because we know that for books, titles are everything. It has to boil all the contents down to a word or phrase that captures your imagination. Titles are important.

"Has It Ever Occurred To You That You Might Be Wrong?"

Now, I didn't say it was the funniest comic strip of all time. Just that it was astute. At several levels. For Christians and theologians are to question ourselves and see how we're wrong.

But this is also close to one of the foundational elements of Jesus's ministry. That he, as a rabbi is teaching his followers to reconsider what they take for granted, for certain and unchangeable. To question what their teachers and grandparents have taught them. To deconstruct their faith.

And we see that Jesus is a liberator come to remove those shackles constraining our vibrant life as children of God.

"You have heard it said... but I say to you..."

Reconsider what you know because I am giving you more.

Generous Eyes

Now, the substance of what is being reconsidered is some hard stuff. Jesus tackles several important emotional shackles in this passage: anger, lust, and selfishness.

And what we're often inclined to do as we read these four sayings is to see them as we saw them before. As prescriptions. Replacements for the old ones. Here's the law, I give you a new law. But this is nothing like what he's doing. The one who came to fulfil, not abolish the law. He's got something else in mind.

He wants us to dig into the Law. To go deeper. To reconsider what we know and what we're told so that we can see it anew. That we can better understand it. So we can ultimately fulfil it.

In speaking to reconciliation, adultery, divorce, and swearing oaths Jesus isn't offering new commandments. They're opportunities for us to better see the original commandments through a lens of mercy and integrity.

We're invited to give new attention to these old ideas with generous eyes, not selfish ones. To reexamine what we know about God through these same generous eyes. Jesus would have us look at our neighbors and our lovers and our families and our business partners through generous eyes.

We often focus on the negative consequences of not following what Jesus is saying. So we miss its opportunity and its anti-selfishness message.

Through generous eyes we see that life isn't about us. And the ticket to a more abundant and vibrant life is in becoming more generous in our actions and spirits. To synthesize those generous eyes into a generous soul.

Don't Swear, Become

In each of these examples Jesus shows what a more generous soul looks like. And to be frank, this stuff is way harder than just doing the right thing. So if you're like me, you hear that and either whine "do I have to?" or throw up my hands with an "impossible" shoulder shrug.

Last week I said that we shouldn't see our work as striving for the impossible, but that Jesus is inviting us into a life of daily intention. So Jesus builds on that, saying that this is the light we're shining and the work we're building. A daily intention of reconciling and profound honesty.

As Daniel Kirk puts it:

"We aren't the forgiven people, we're the forgiveness people."

And we are about creating a kind of community built on honesty and integrity. Not of making promises, but of doing and being and trusting. That we are who we say we are. And I treat you as you say you are, not who I think you are.

To give up a need to control each other and dismiss each other. To not live by alternative facts and different rules. Just because that's in our world. Or because it's in our culture's blueprint.

Jesus invites us to reconsider all we've been taught. By our families and friends and schools and churches because that's how we come to know truth. How we become repairers of the breach, shalom-makers, and children of God.

We're born with generous eyes and our system reprograms them toward selfishness. So we must develop new vision, through deconstruction and new discovery to retrieve those generous eyes. To see the Kingdom already around us. To see that Christ is already here.