

Sunday February 12th, 2017
6th Sunday after Epiphany

PRAYER: Great is your wisdom, O God. You are mighty in power and wondrous in your love for us. Your eyes are fixed on those who put their trust in you; you know all that we do. You command no one to neither be wicked nor give anyone permission to sin. In all that we do you seek obedience from us and send your Spirit that we may know your will. We come now before you with hearts that are upright and voices singing your praise. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: God of compassion, have mercy upon us. You have given us statutes, but we follow our own desires. We know of your laws, yet we try to justify our own way. You desire obedience, we practice rebellion. You offer blessing, we search for scapegoats. Make us mindful of how we disorder your intentions. Set us aright in accord with your design for us. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: “And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, ‘This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts...I will forgive their iniquities and remember their sin no more.’ Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin”. (Hebrews 10:15-17)

STEWARDSHIP: May God accept our gifts, as we go seeking reconciliation with our brothers and sisters. In doing so, we seek to love God with all our: hearts, souls, minds and strength. May the reconciliation we pursue, reflect our love for neighbour as for ourselves. And upon achieving this reconciliation, we may present our gifts and more importantly our lives as blameless. Let us now, offer our gifts and ourselves.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O Lord, you both judge and pardon. In long days past you declared your law among us. Yet, through the centuries of our history and the years of our lives, we have smashed your tablets upon the stones. We have broken your commandments. We cried out that your way was too difficult.

So you sent your law again. But instead of making your way easier, this time you tried to write it upon our hearts. You sent Jesus of Nazareth, and he went beyond the letter of the law to its spirit. He declared us guilty before we even acted. He made us aware of the battles that rage within us before accusing us of the wars that rage around us. Not only the actions of our hands, but the motives of our hearts, were put on trial, and we were found wanting.

Yet he forgave us. Even those of us who crucified him. He showed us something terribly important about who you are and how you love, and about how you judge. It is not for your sake, but ours, that you convict us and then give us the freedom to try again. Your law of love is impossible to keep, yet we must try; your forgiveness of sin is impossible to believe, yet we must trust.

Help us to trust that you are greater than the most loving human parent. We humans have an end to our patience and a limit to our strength. Our faith wavers, our hope dims, our love stumbles over pride. But you are infinitely patient and strong beyond compare. Your faith and your hope and your love abide, but the greatest of these is love.

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We have heard that it was said in ancient times, “You shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, and you shall not bear false witness.” But today we hear again the greatest of all commandments, that we will love the Lord our God and our neighbours as ourselves.

It is not an easy Way. But as you have chosen us, we chose you. Keep us in the Way we must go, O Lord, our judge and Redeemer.

BENEDICTION: God has called heaven and earth as witnesses. God has set before us the choice between life and death. We may create, or we shall destroy. The choice is ours. God now, down from the mountain, loving, obeying, and clinging to the Lord.

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Matthew 5:21-37
“It’s All About Reconciliation.”

I was mindful of the Carrol household this week thinking about Emma’s upcoming nuptials. Laura and I have been in the same boat. The topic of weddings had been front and center in our household five years ago; with Rachel’s impending big day approaching. We booked the church, the reception hall, the ladies said “yes to the dress”, tuxes were ordered, flowers arranged, invitations printed, limo booked, and dad and mother ended up quite a bit poorer. In the end though, it was a wonderful day

I wonder though if Emma and Nancy, maybe even Jim have taken to TV Shows they otherwise would never watch; namely in some television programs based on wedding themes. Shows like: *Four Weddings*, the before mentioned *Yes to the Dress* and even shows about wedding cakes have appeared on our TV lately. It’s funny, how so many television shows hold no interest for you, until the subject matter of them matches your current situation.

As a minister though, my mind often thinks primarily of the ceremony itself. I think of all the details like: when is the rehearsal, what time is the rehearsal and wedding, how late will the bride be, who will be at the church to receive the flowers, and will the photographer become a nuisance. This last one is critical. Many a photographer has ruined an otherwise beautiful and sacred ceremony.

Stories abound of photographers taking flash photographs in the minister’s face and temporarily blinding him or her. Flash photographs also ruin the sacredness of the ceremony, as photographers run around in their multi-pocketed vests, grabbing the best angle. The late, Rev. Ken Morrison, told me that he once did a wedding where the photographer popped up in the baptistery to get that all important shot.

I also get concerned about how nervous the couple will be. I don’t think Rachel and Jordan had too much trouble with their nerves on the big day, but many young couples do. On one particular occasion a minister was trying hard to dispel a bride’s nervousness at having to walk up the aisle for her wedding. The minister suggested that to calm herself, she should focus on familiar objects during her walk up the aisle.

“First”, he told her, “think about the aisle, which you’ve walked down so often. Then focus on the altar with the pretty flowers. Finally think of your groom George-he’ll be there, waiting for you with a smile on his face.” On the day of the wedding, the congregation was surprised to hear the bride coming down the aisle muttering audibly: “Aisle, altar, George. I’ll alter George.” Ah, the glorious dream of every new bride; to alter her new husband.

To hold that fantasy of molding him into the man she wants him to be, and sadly, how fleeting a dream it is. I guess, I really don’t have to tell you that, relationships, and I mean all relationships, not just marriages, are fraught with possible trouble.

Sunday February 12th, 2017
6th Sunday after Epiphany

A poorly chosen word, a perceived slight of some kind, or misread body language, and a hundred other things: can all lead to trouble. All of us have been hurt in our relationships and yes, we have done the hurting as well, to someone else.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is actually talking about relationships. I know it may be hard to see that, but what all these rules add up to, are ways to preserve relationships or prevent damage to them. What is also presented here, by Jesus, is a contrast; a contrast between two views about the nature of evil.

The first view of evil presented, is the one we are most familiar with, and probably understand the best. Evil is seen by most of us, as destructive actions towards another human being; like murder. As such, there are severe punishments for such actions, both in the courts and in the afterlife. This is how we most often think of evil. We may think of someone like 27 year old Alexandre Bissonnette in Quebec as being evil, because of what he did; killing six Muslim men at prayer and seriously wounding others.

There is no argument, from Jesus, that these types of actions by Mr. Bissonnette are evil; nor do I think there is any argument from any of us. What is different about what Jesus teaches in this passage, is that evil is not restricted to only our actions. In taking the idea of evil one critical step further, Jesus is stating that evil also resides in our inner beings. Evil, is still present, even if we do not act out our inclinations. What Jesus is concerned about, is our disposition and our feelings.

As an example, Jesus goes on to say therefore, if you are angry at your brother, even if you do not physically harm him, you are still being evil. Frankly, this is a bit surprising, don't you think? I mean, what does it really matter, what I think, as long as I don't act out my anger? All of us have had dark thoughts about other people. Mrs. Graham was asked one time about whether she ever thought of divorcing her husband Dr. Billy Graham, and in all honesty replied, "Not divorce, murder yes, but not divorce."

The problem is that unresolved anger is just as damaging to our relationships as murder is. And damaging relationship is the very nature of evil. Killing someone, permanently destroys a relationship, but so does anger. Out of anger: we stop communicating, we avoid the one we are angry at, we might speak ill of someone, we might plot behind their back, we wish them harm, and we can no longer show any affection or caring to them.

Evil, by its nature, seeks to destroy relationship bonds that should unite us instead. Thinking of evil, as destroying relationships, is a good template for understanding the rest of this passage and frankly, most of Jesus' teaching. Consider further Jesus' words about calling someone a "fool" or "cursing" them. Neither of these actions will win you any friends. The goal of Jesus' disciples is to make relationships not destroy them.

The reconciliation of strained relationships, is to be of the highest priority for Christ's followers. It takes precedence over almost everything else, including as we see in this passage, worshipping God.

Sunday February 12th, 2017
6th Sunday after Epiphany

“So if you are standing before the altar in the Temple, offering a sacrifice to God, and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there beside the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person.” (23-24) A persons’ anger towards us is not to be viewed as a reason to avoid reconciliation. I point out to you that according to Jesus, it is our responsibility to be reconciled to the other person.

We are not to wait until they approach us, or apologize to us. It is our primary responsibility as Christians to mend fences and restore relationships. Now, I know these words are very tough to implement. I bet, even this morning, you are thinking of that one person, who you just can’t seem to reconcile with; that one person who just gets under your skin and makes your life miserable.

We need to remember, though, that this is not about us, or our feelings; but rather about the evil perpetrated by fractured relationships. That’s why, not only is adultery wrong, but simply looking at someone lustfully is evil. Lust is the inner disposition that threatens a marriage. When we succumb to lust, we compare our spouse to another person. We are judging our spouse in comparison to another, by finding faults or perceived shortcomings, and as such building a wedge between us.

Marriages never fail in a day. They deteriorate over time: as resentment, anger, and unresolved issues, cut deeper and deeper into the bonds that should bind the couple together. The same thing happens in many divorces, where the selfish pursuit of one or even both partners, severs the bonds. The divorce is simply the end result of a long period of time of un-reconciled differences, of evil left unchecked.

Jesus’ point is that: anger, lust, divorce, calling someone a fool, ignoring someone who has something against you, all lay waste to the most important thing we have in life; namely, relationships. Furthermore, Jesus is telling us that we have to take full responsibility for the health and vitality of our relationships. If something is not going right in one of our relationships, it’s up to us to fix it.

No matter how tempting it may be; we are not permitted the indulgence, in our relationships, to blame the other person. The primary issue is never, whose fault it is. Rather, of prime importance, is how quickly we can resolve this wedge between us; and in Jesus’ words, the sooner the better.

This idea of taking responsibility for our relationships is further explored by Jesus in the next few verses. In the version we read today, the topic is on making vows. In other versions of scriptural translation, the word is often rendered as “swearing”. Now, swearing in this case has nothing to do with foul language, or as I have heard it referred to as, having a “potty mouth”. It does actually refer to making a vow or taking an oath.

Jesus is not talking about in a court room, as some Christians believe, where you get up and swear to tell the truth; because, in the court room you are making a promise for yourself. Jesus is referring to people who make promises based on someone or something else.

Sunday February 12th, 2017
6th Sunday after Epiphany

Some modern examples of this might sound like, “I swear, on my mother’s grave.” Someone might say, “As God is my witness”. I have also heard, “May lightning strike me down, if I am not telling the truth.” How about a couple phrases children even use, “Pinky swear” and “Cross your heart and hope to die.”

There are many other examples of people swearing oaths in such ways; invoking someone, or something else to give credence to what they say. The problem with such swearing is that it damages relationships. Swearing in this manner, introduces someone or something else, as a barrier to the relationship. Think about what this kind of swearing or oath taking really means. Let’s pay attention to how ridiculous it all is.

There is no way on earth; we can control the other person on which we are swearing, least of all God. Swearing, transforms a direct, open, frank relationship: into an indirect one. By swearing, we are denying our own responsibility for our truthfulness; and righteousness means, taking responsibility for what we say or do. To avoid any evil, or destruction of relationships; our statements need to stand on their own.

When we invoke someone or something in our oaths, we are immediately tipping the other person off that something is wrong. In the words of Shakespeare, “Me thinks thou dost protest too much.” The stronger the attempt to assure truthfulness of what we say, by invoking: God, our mothers, or whatever, the higher the probability of falsehood. Just think back to the last time someone tried to assure their truthfulness in this way to you. Did you not feel uncomfortable?

Did the swearing make you feel more assured of your relationship of trust with the other person? So, let your yes be yes and your no be no. Our statements should stand on their own merit, and we should demonstrate that our will is our own. If people cannot trust us, or our word on its own, without invoking outside support, then our relationships are doomed, and that is evil.

Do you understand what Jesus is telling us? Evil is perpetrated in the heart, long before we hear about it in the news. The damage that murder or adultery causes, began earlier with anger and lust. Jesus wants us to nip the evil in the bud; to get at it, while it is festering inside us. To accomplish this, Jesus makes what seems like a very harsh command. “If your eye-causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away.” (v. 29)

“If your hand-even your stronger hand-causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for the whole body to be thrown into hell.” These frightening words make it sound as if Jesus is suggesting self-mutilation as a way to combat evil. However, we must remember that Jesus is using a rabbinical teaching method. Exaggerate to the extreme, the point you are making.

The Sadducees in Luke 20 used the same approach in talking about the resurrection. There they made up a ridiculous story about a woman who had seven brothers for husbands.

Sunday February 12th, 2017
6th Sunday after Epiphany

Jesus' point is this; whatever situation puts you at a greater chance to sin, in this case, harm your relationships, than avoid them. Cut them out of your life. If alcohol is harming your relationships, don't go to a bar. If you spend hours watching pornography on your computer, harming how you think of your wife, than put a filter on your system or place your computer in a more public part of your home.

If someone makes you so very angry that you fanaticize about them being harmed in some way, start praying. It is also advisable to avoid those situations with that person that trigger your anger. It is hard to stay angry with someone if you are praying for them. Jesus expresses what our response to difficult people should be in the next few verses, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

We do, however, need to be sincere in our prayers, and our efforts, in seeking the right path. We don't want to be like the man who was having trouble losing weight, and was avoiding sweets. One day, he reported to a friend, he was feeling very tempted to stop and get a donut. He therefore prayed, "Dear Lord, if you want me to stop and get a donut, show me a sign by having a parking spot open up in front of the shop and waiting for me."

His friend asked, "Did your prayer work?" The man replied, "Well, it took five trips around the block, but a parking space did finally open up." This passage, from Matthew, is all about relationships. It is about how we: preserve, strengthen, heal and reconcile fractured relationships. It is about how we avoid the evil we perpetrate in this world by damaging our relationships. Because, we all know that damaged relationships have a tendency to spread.

If, a father and mother have a damaged relationship, the kids suffer. A parent has a damaged relationship with a grown child, and the extended family pays the price. Two co-workers cannot get along at the office and productivity and company morale plummet. Issues like poverty, injustice and political differences, divide people; and that leads to clashes in the street, and a society torn in two. Just see what's happening in the US.

Our highest calling as God's people is what, "To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and to love your neighbour as yourself." Our highest calling therefore is relationships; good relationships. If we thought long enough and hard enough, I think, we can trace, how all the troubles humanity has brought upon itself, are directly linked to a fractured relationship.

If we want better homes, better churches, better schools, better work places or better neighbourhoods: then we need to root out evil wherever it manifests itself, and according to Jesus there seems to be no more fertile ground for evil than our hearts. Let us commit to: guarding our hearts, our marriages, our friendships, our families, all so we can have no regrets when we stand before our God.