

EPIPHANY 6, Feb. 12, 2017, Year A

"You are the light of the world..." (from Matthew 5:13-20)

- Whether Jesus meant his words this way or not, a good bit of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is usually understood as being about *ethics*.¹ That is, we often understand Jesus' teaching here as being about *how we should act and think*. We become absorbed with the *shape* of proper behavior, and don't reflect on *why* we should behave in particular ways. Yet, Jesus is not offering us *ethical theories* to help us sort out problematic situations. Nor is he simply laying down 'rules.' He is sharing with us *the spiritual keys to a God-like righteousness*. This *gift* of righteousness comes to us with the gift of being a bearer of the divine light ~ a light that has been—by *grace*—implanted within us.
- Because of this, I have focused the last couple of weeks on the *big picture*, on *why* we should live *in the particular ways* that Jesus *begins* to speak about in our Gospel today. If we don't try to get a sense for *the big picture that Jesus has in mind*, we're not likely to have a perceptive understanding of his meaning when it comes to things like murder and anger, or adultery and lust.
- Most of us are aware of significant differences between the pieties of various Christian communities. One way of 'mapping the contours' of these differences is to consider *how we hear and understand Jesus' teaching*. Set aside, for a moment, examining how various Christians shape doctrine, or how Christian communities understand Gospel miracles. We can, instead, compare how we think about the moral life. For example, *some Christians take a rigorist approach* toward applying Jesus' teaching, seeking to do *everything* he advises *without exception*. Whether it follows from religious upbringing, or stems from personal temperament, *some of us incline toward anxious scrupulosity*—as if any slight deviation from Jesus words will leave us liable to *judgment, and exclusion* from the Kingdom: I might say, 'Yes, I know I have *not been guilty of murder*... But, gosh, I must admit that I was angry with a brother or sister Christian the other day. And I know that I mumbled, "you fool," when another driver cut me off this morning. And so, even though I *try*, I will always fall short. Perhaps I'll *never* make it!'

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- Other Christians—including many of us Episcopalians(!)—take a comparatively lax approach to Jesus' teaching about human conduct. Those *who do*, conclude that *the shape of our character is more important* than evaluating individual actions. Whether, again, it's through upbringing or our natural temperament, some of us incline toward a *flexible* and *unbothered* interpretation of Jesus' words ~ *as if Jesus was, of course, speaking only figuratively, and that we shouldn't get hung up on the details*. Like whether I've ever looked at another person with a lustful eye or have spoken about him or her critically. There may be some good in both the *rigorist* and *laxist* approaches but, on its own, *each one becomes problematic*, and an impediment to spiritual growth.
- Hearing the Gospel as we do, Sunday by Sunday in discrete bits, can create misunderstanding. Encountering what seem like *separate* passages, we become familiar with stories about Jesus, or aspects of his teaching, *removed from their context*. Our Gospel today provides a good example. How many of us can remember last Sunday's Gospel *in such a way that we can connect today's passage with it*? And if we can't, *how then* can we perceive the way Jesus' prior words shape his meaning today?
- Last Sunday, we reflected on how Jesus said ~ "You are the light of the world!" ~> *Now, why are we the light? ~> So that others may see*. And, so that in seeing our grace-imparted light, they might give glory to our Father in heaven. Jesus' assumption differs markedly from the Roman culture of his time, *and* from the world we live in. Like the Romans, *we often do good works for the honor that might rebound to us!* We give to charities, participate in civic clubs and volunteer at local agencies, all with an eye to our résumé and our profile in the community. A lot of this activity ends up *glorifying ourselves*. It's *not inevitable* that this should happen; but it's hard to avoid because of our pride.
- This directly affects our approach to spiritual growth and our path to holiness. *We often think we live the moral life in order to attain holiness ~ as if, by being good, we then become holy*. But this reflects another misunderstanding.

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Christians don't act ethically *so that they can* become holy. *Christians are only made holy by God*, through Christ, in the Spirit. And this begins at Baptism. Then, *having been made holy by God*, we seek to manifest the light we have been given, by how we then live. Once again, *so that others may see* what we do, and give *glory to our Father* in heaven.

- This helps us better understand Jesus' strong words in our Gospel today. As I have mentioned, some are *discouraged* by his words ~ as if, *no matter how much we try*, we are bound to fall short, and fail. But I think Jesus meant these bracing words as *encouragement!* God has come in Christ to *transform the whole person, and not just change my outward behavior*. Last week, *we heard Jesus commend a righteousness that "exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees."* The righteousness he urges is *not concerned with meeting minimum requirements, so that we can attain a goal or result - like glory from others, or salvation from God. The 'exceeding' righteousness Jesus commends is given to us, not something we attain.* We *receive his* righteousness, rather than summon up an imitation of it within ourselves. Grace brings faith; Grace also inspires and enables faithful works. As Paul reminds us in our Epistle, we are *"God's field, God's building."*²
- The question, then, is *not*, *'what can I do in order to be saved?'* Nor is it to ask the inverse, *'what can I do to avoid being damned?'* Having been redeemed, the question becomes, *'how can I let this light that has been given to me, shine in my life so that others might seek it, as well?'*
- Another way to approach this matter, is by asking two rhetorical questions. For example, *whether in the Great Covenant or in the New Testament, would God give us commandments that are impossible to keep? What kind of loving God would ask us to do what we cannot possibly do?* So, as our reading from Deuteronomy implies, we can choose! And, we are encouraged to *try*. *"Choose life" says God*, through Moses, concerning the very Law that Jesus says he came to fulfill, and not abolish.³ For we can embrace and savor the living water that has been poured into us. We can receive the Spirit-given life that it brings.

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- Jesus said, "I came that [you] may have life, and have it abundantly."⁴ He gives *abundance in a world of scarcity*. He gives *opportunity*, rather than *limited chances*. Paul has this kind of abundance in mind when he tells the Ephesians about "the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we might be filled with all the *fullness* of God." He then speaks of God's "*power at work within us*." God's power in us "*is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine*." If we focus on our own strengths, and our efforts and attainments, the prospect of falling short *and failing* will haunt us. But if we look at what God has done in our lives, and is doing now in the Spirit, we see something else. We see abundance; we find grace; we experience light. As our Preschoolers would remind us, "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine!"

Matthew 5:21-37

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

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“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

Notes:

¹ See Matthew 5 - 7, for the Sermon on the Mount.

² See 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

³ See Deuteronomy 30:15-20.

⁴ See John 10:10; pronoun has been changed from “they” to “you.”