

Sermon Notes

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

[Deuteronomy 30:15-20](#) / [Psalms 119:1-8](#) / [1 Corinthians 3:1-9](#) / [Matthew 5:21-37](#)

February 13th, 2011

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley, California

Jesus continues to unfold the heart of his teachings this day, and we get into the hard sometimes painful stuff in today's gospel – where the gospel rubber, as it were, hits the road of our lives – where the abstract suddenly gets very real.

Jesus is speaking to crowds who have just heard him tell them they will not enter the kingdom of heaven unless their righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and scribes. That's right – unless their righteousness exceeds that of the religious authorities, they won't make it into the fullness of God's grace.

This is tough Jesus talk, and he's not done. He starts unpacking the central aspects of the law – intimately familiar it must have been to the crowds listening – this law of their ancestors are unfolded one by one with Jesus saying it's not enough to simply follow the commandments. It's not sufficient to simply be "good law-abiding folk." Everything from easy divorce to litigation to anger at our neighbor is brought out into the light. It's striking to me that the list really hasn't changed all that much in two millennia. While things are structured differently legally now than in the first century, we still struggle more than ever with disposable relationships, with the ease with which we take one another to court. We still must wrestle with the hostility and righteous indignation we foster against our neighbors and those closest to us. We still confront our lust after any number of things and people – the tragic ways we objectify one another for use and abuse and the myriad ways we profit by it financially and emotionally.

How often we objectify even God! Our prayer life is dangerously riddled with personal, private, and often self-serving requests, as though God is some kind of cosmic ATM. We're upset or at least puzzled when God doesn't give us what we want. We bless God when we get what we've asked. We often delude ourselves into thinking that by being good, God will give us what we want a bit like Santa. If we're bad, well then, we get the lump of spiritual coal. The best news I can offer to that reality is we're not alone in this delusion. It's ancient, and all too human. Just read the Psalms, and you'll understand what I mean. But sooner or later this understanding breaks down. Something bad happens even though we've been good. Hard work doesn't always get us to the goal we had hoped. The self-help obsession of the past few decades starts to fray around the edges when indeed we learn that bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad. We are not in as much control over our own destinies as we once thought.

Ironically enough, this harsh reality check of our experience on our self-justifying expectations is a grace. Jesus, you see, is asking more of us than this primitive, bargaining life with God. Holding ourselves back from bad behavior is only a start, he tells us. The law he has come to fulfill is still there, yes, but God wants more of us than our simply being players who say we won fair and square by following the rules of some spiritual Super Bowl. Paul's demand of the Corinthians parallels today's gospel: we have to be weaned off the spiritual milk and

start taking the solid food of our own responsibility for the good news of Jesus Christ. We are being called to grow up out of infancy. We are called to become full-fledged heirs of the kingdom of heaven, where love and peace reign not because everyone behaves themselves, but because we have deliberately and intentionally planted our hearts, our very being in the Way of peace, the Way of love, the Way of life – that place where death no longer has dominion, and even the terrible things that happen become opportunities for resurrection and grace.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, part of the confessing church in Germany during World War II, who resisted fascism and helped Jews escape the holocaust at the cost of his own life, wrote about “cheap grace.” In our sacramental tradition, particularly in one as radically welcoming and accepting as our own, we must continually be wary of falling into the trap of cheap grace, of saying God’s love for us is enough by itself and forgetting the transformation it demands of us. We must learn, as my spiritual director has so aptly put it, that God’s grace is indeed free and open to us, but we have a choice in whether we’re going to work in cooperation with it or against it.

Protestants and Catholics have for the past five hundred years quietly and sometimes vociferously argued both with each other and within their own traditions about what happens when we partake in the sacramental bread and the wine. Is it God’s grace given for us freely, as unworthy as we are; offered by a generous Savior who loves us to pieces no matter where we are or what we’ve done? Or is it a demand on us to remake our lives, a grace that is only as powerful as we allow it to be by our faith?

The Anglican answer is, of course, “Yes.”

One of our Eucharistic prayers puts it this way: “Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal.” We are called to be remade by communion, to find strength to be active participants in that remaking. We are called to become part of the grace renewing the world, and that renewal begins here and now.

God’s grace is generous and bountiful and radically free. But how we receive it matters just as much in our engagement in the life of the kingdom. We receive it week after week as an invitation to grow in our faith journey, to take ownership not of ourselves, but of the truth we have been given. To grow up in faith. To assume our awesome responsibility of sharing the abundant love for a world hungry for community, awaiting the broken bread and the common cup of God’s offering – and God’s offering given through us by our words and deeds. And in that we fulfill the ancient law, not for the law’s sake, but for God in Christ’s, who desires us to become partners of divine love, laborers in the vineyard of creation, co-conspirators even for the in-breaking of God’s gracious reign.