

## **Epiphany 6, Year A**

February 12, 2017

*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.*

*"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.*

### *1 Corinthians 3:1-9*

*Brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?*

*What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have*

*a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.*

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus uses some of the strongest language he uses anywhere. He speaks of cutting off hands, plucking out eyes, having our whole body go into hell, being liable to the hell of fire, etc. What's going on here? What is Jesus so adamant about, that he resorts to such powerfully disturbing language?

When we look closely at today's Gospel, we see that Jesus mentions a list of ancient Jewish laws against certain behaviors: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'." "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'" "You have heard that it was said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'" "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not swear falsely.'" All of these laws were common knowledge to Jesus' listeners. They describe outward actions that are observable by other people: murder, adultery, divorce, uttering an oath. But then Jesus responds in each instance, "But **I** say to you..." – and then he lists inner attitudes that are *not* observable by other people, attitudes harbored in the heart and soul of a person: anger, unforgiveness, lust – and he says that it is these **interior** attitudes, the state of one's heart and soul – that are *spiritually* far more serious than the outward actions which the ancient Laws prohibited.

I imagine it is rare indeed that a person wakes up in the morning, asks himself, "I wonder what I'll do today?" and then answers, "I know, I'll go murder someone!" The far more likely scenario is that there has been **inside** that person a growing, simmering anger, jealousy, unforgiveness, resentment or contempt toward another – for a matter of months or maybe even years. And those *interior* thoughts, feelings, and imaginations may build over time, and spill over into some outward manifestation such as abusive speech or even – in the extreme case – murder. The Old Testament Law, "Do not murder," only addressed the *outward culmination* of the slowly building **interior** anger, resentment, envy, or whatever had been accumulating *inside* the person. Jesus puts the focus on these **internal** attitudes, thoughts, and emotions which feed the fire of anger and hostility that could eventually culminate in murder. He is directing us to look inside our own hearts and souls, and honestly and unflinchingly deal with what we find there.

Jesus uses strong, hyperbolic language in addressing the seriousness of the attitudes and thoughts harbored in our hearts and souls because he knows that while most people would readily agree that **murder** is wrong, and may *never* be tempted to take such an obviously immoral action, we **ARE** tempted to anger and abusive language – may even believe we are **justified** in harboring such anger and unforgiveness! And because we often justify such interior thoughts, opinions, and judgments as our right, believing that we are righteous in our anger and justified

in our resentments, these inner attitudes, thoughts, and judgments are far more dangerous to our inner spirit. We easily deal with outward actions – we don't murder; we don't steal. We are much more reluctant to look inside ourselves into the state of our hearts and souls. But Jesus knows that harboring anger, resentment, and unforgiveness toward another person in our hearts is *also* doing them violence – relational violence, spiritual violence. Our legal system does not arrest us if we are angry inside – the police only show up when that anger has been acted upon. The focus of our society – like the focus of the Pharisees of Jesus' day – is on outward behavior. But for Jesus, the focus is just the opposite: on what cannot be outwardly seen – the condition of our heart, the state of our soul, our inner life.

After murder, Jesus goes on to deal with adultery, divorce, and swearing by the name of God. In each case, he changes the focus away from our exterior actions toward our interior disposition and the state of our soul which, after all, is the source of all the unacceptable outward behavior.

Do you remember the story of God sending the prophet Samuel to anoint as king one of Jesse's sons? Samuel was at first greatly impressed by the outward size and strength of one of Jesse's sons. But God said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature... for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." (*1 Samuel 16:7*) By the time of Jesus, the Jewish religious leaders had largely taken the Jewish Law and made it into outward acts which people could perform without ever changing their hearts and minds.

And in our own way, do we not often do the same thing? Do we not say to ourselves, "I'm a good Christian! I go to church every Sunday, pray every day, read my Bible, support the church with my pledge." Yet all the while we are doing these commendable outward acts, our inner spirit is filled with anger and unforgiveness toward another person; intense hostility toward this or that political party or government office-holder; hatred of some class of people – blacks, Muslims, refugees, American Indians; a sense of superiority over the homeless, those who are unemployed; and self-righteous indignation toward those who receive help from this or that government assistance program "which I support with **my** tax dollars!" You see how easily we justify these interior attitudes which, in reality, do relational and spiritual violence to other people?

My friends, these interior attitudes are what Jesus is taking direct aim at in our Gospel. They are the very things that Jesus says will make us "liable to judgment, to the council, to the hell of fire" – our inner anger, resentments, unforgiveness, animosity toward classes of people, our feelings of self-righteous indignation.

Later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind

Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.” (Matthew 23:25-26) Over and over in his teachings, Jesus draws our attention *away* from externalities *toward* our interior selves, the condition of our heart. It is the theme that he announced at the very beginning of his ministry, when he said, “The kingdom of God is at hand. Change your hearts and lives and believe the Good News!” (Mark 1:15, Matt. 4:17, NCV) He doesn’t say, “Do not murder”, “Do not commit adultery”, or offer a laundry list of rules, but rather “Change your hearts and lives.”

I believe that St. Paul is saying the same thing in our Epistle today, where he focuses on our spiritual growth, using the image of an infant maturing to adulthood – an image he often uses in his letters. Infants need rules regarding outward behavior: “Share your toys! Don’t hit your sister!” because they don’t have the maturity of reason and consciousness to discern for themselves how to relate to one another in love. Paul calls the Corinthians “infants” who must still be fed milk, because they have not achieved the spiritual maturity to relate to one another in love.

In our world, I suspect it has always been the case that we tend to focus on that which is outside ourselves, rather than examine what is on the inside. We love noticing the speck in another person’s eye, rather than dealing with the log in our own eye. But Jesus is crystal clear in today’s Gospel that it is the thoughts and attitudes which we harbor inside, in our own heart and soul, that he is far more concerned about than what is going on “out there.” Why? I think an answer is to be found in Luke’s Gospel, where Jesus says, “The kingdom of God is not coming in a way that can be outwardly seen; ... For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you.” *Luke 17:20-21*

May I suggest that each of us try something this week: Instead of going through our week taking note of what is wrong in our world with other people and outward situations, let us instead, at the end of each day, honestly reflect on what feelings, emotions, and strong thoughts we have harbored in our heart that day. It is a spiritual practice that Pope Francis and all Jesuits engage in each day. (*Examen.*) Let us be unflinchingly honest with ourselves! This, I think, is a necessary part of growing in spiritual maturity; this is what Paul would call “eating solid food.” “The kingdom of God is within us” – so we must look inside ourselves and be honest about what we find there, be it anger, unforgiveness, lust, resentment, hostility, prejudice, self-righteous indignation, whatever. For it is our inner lives that Jesus addresses when he says, “But *I* say to you...”; and it is when we honestly, humbly, and fearlessly work on our *interior* lives that we begin eating solid food, and start growing to maturity, the full stature of Christ. (*Ephesians 4:13*)

AMEN