

## **Epiphany 6A 2020 Sermon**

February 16, 2020

*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.*

Cutting off hands, tearing out eyes, being liable to the hell of fire, having our whole body thrown into hell? What's gotten *into* Jesus? What is he so adamant about that he resorts to such powerfully disturbing language, such hyperbole?

Jesus begins this section of his Sermon on the Mount by mentioning some ancient Jewish laws against certain behaviors: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’... ‘You shall not commit adultery’... ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce’... ‘You shall not swear falsely.’” Now, all of these laws, which derive from the 10 Commandments, were common knowledge to Jesus’ listeners. They describe outward actions that are observable by other people: murder, adultery, divorce, uttering an oath. But in response to each of these ancient laws, Jesus says, “But ***I*** say to you...” – and then he lists ***inner*** attitudes, passions, and mindsets that are not always observable by other people. Attitudes, passions, and mindsets harbored in the heart, mind, and soul of a person: anger, unforgiveness, lust. And Jesus says that it is these ***interior*** attitudes, passions, and mindsets, the state of one’s heart, mind, and soul, that is even ***more*** serious than the *outward* actions which the ancient Laws prohibited. For these outward actions do not come out of nowhere; they *proceed* from the

**interior** state of our heart, mind, and soul.

It would be strange indeed if a person were to wake up one morning, ask himself, “I wonder what I’ll do today?” and then answer, “I know, I’ll go murder someone!” No. The act of murder does not come out of thin air, but rather proceeds from an inner state of anger, jealousy, unforgiveness, hurt, resentment, or contempt toward another – all of which may have been simmering inside for months or maybe even years. Those *interior* thoughts, feelings, and imaginations 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 a slowly building **interior** anger, resentment, envy, or whatever had been accumulating *inside* the person. In today’s Gospel, Jesus focuses on these **internal** attitudes, mindsets, and passions. He directs us to look inside our own hearts, and honestly and unflinchingly deal with what we find there. It’s called, “self-examination,” and it’s one of the things our Prayer Book, in our Ash Wednesday service, calls us to do during Lent – which begins 10 days from now. (BCP p. 265)

In today’s Gospel, Jesus uses strong, exaggerated language, the rabbinic technique of hyperbole, in order to emphasize the vital *significance* of the attitudes and thoughts harbored in our hearts and minds, because he knows that while most people would readily agree

that **murder** is wrong, and may *never* be tempted to take such an extreme action, we ARE tempted to anger, self-righteousness, resentments, prejudices, and unforgiveness – and we may even believe we are **justified** in harboring these things inside! 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 can be even *more* dangerous to our heart and spirit than our outward actions. We don't murder; we don't steal! But we **do**, at times, harbor anger, resentment, animosity, and unforgiveness toward another person or group in our heart; and what Jesus is saying is that **this** *also* is a kind of violence – relational violence, spiritual violence.

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 Jesse's son Eliab. Upon seeing Eliab, Samuel says to himself, "He **has** to be the one the LORD has chosen." But God says 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 16:6-7*) The Pharisees of Jesus' day thought they were righteous because they performed the right outward acts of the Law; but they never changed their hearts and minds at all. The LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.

It's so easy for us to do – to focus on outward acts, and ignore the state of our heart, our mind, our soul. “I'm a good Christian!” we say. “I go to church every Sunday, pray every day, work hard, read my Bible, support the church with my pledge.” Yet if all the while we are doing these commendable outward acts our heart is filled with anger and unforgiveness toward another person; or hostility toward this or that political party or candidate; or animosity toward some group of people (whether defined by race, religion, nationality, or whatever); or a sense of superiority over the poor, the homeless, or those who are unemployed – if we are harboring these inner thoughts and resentments and animosities toward others, then offering our gifts at the altar is a hollow act; it does not reflect our heart. That's why Jesus says, “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.”

Later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus will say 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) Purity of heart will lead to purity of action; blessed are the pure in heart! (Matt. 5:8) 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, “The kingdom of God is at hand. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery.” Nor does he offer a laundry list of rules. Rather, he says, “The kingdom of God is at hand. 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 infants don’t have the maturity or capacity to discern for themselves how to relate to one another in love and forgiveness. Paul calls the Corinthians “infants” who must still be fed milk, because they have not achieved maturity of heart and mind, such that they can relate to one another in love and forgiveness.

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, soul, and mind, 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 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 part of a spiritual practice that Pope Francis and all Jesuits engage in each day – a practice called, “the Examen.” Let us be unflinchingly honest with ourselves! For this, I believe, is a necessary part of growing in spiritual maturity; this is what St. Paul would call “eating solid food.” Jesus is calling us to look inside ourselves and be honest about what we find there, be it anger, unforgiveness, lust, resentment, hostility, prejudice, self-righteous indignation, or 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 start growing into maturity, the full stature of Christ. (*Ephesians 4:13*)

AMEN