

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
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6th Sunday of Year A Mt 5:17-37

I recently saw a t-shirt that had a picture of Jesus with his hand raised and underneath the image of Jesus were the words, "I never said that." In the culture wars of the past twenty years many condemnations were attributed to Jesus, which in fact He never uttered. Because many people were not that familiar with the Gospels, they didn't know the difference. Too often the alleged words of Jesus were used by some as a club with which to hit the opposition over the head. The result is the sad fact that some people have just enough religion to make their lives miserable. For them religion is just a list of "do's and don'ts," of "rules and regs," of duty and obligation. There is no sense of joy, of consolation, of peace, that comes from their faith, only sadness, guilt, and judgment.

The Gospel readings at this time of the year seem to contribute to such an attitude. Taken, as they all are, from the Sermon on the Mount, these readings present an extremely high ethical ideal, one almost impossible to realize. Taken by themselves, they seem more like "bad news" than "good news," charging us that our behavior, our attitudes, are not close to what Jesus asks of us. But, in order to see how today's passage fit into the full Gospel message, we have to remember the rest of the Scriptures to find there the mention of God's mercy and healing grace. Otherwise, we might tend to flagellate ourselves with guilt, because we feel we will never be what Jesus wants us to be.

A quick reading of today's gospel would leave us with the impression that Jesus is tightening up all the laws of the Old Testament. Yet what we actually see Jesus doing here is keeping intact the basic summons to live a life of justice and charity, as had been taught by all the prophets of the Old Testament. What Jesus does here, then, is not just give more rules and regulations, but challenge us to a deeper level of response in our moral lives, than simply that of the external, observable, outward, ethical dimension. Jesus invites us to examine that innermost part of ourselves--that welter of feelings and emotions, of hates and insecurities, of various lusts and fears, that is the source of our individual misdeeds. Our piety, our holiness, He says, must "surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees," so that our transformation into people who are good, loving and just, reaches down below the level of superficial observation into the very depths of who and what we really are. So, from the inside out, rather than from the outside in, we are invited to become different kinds of people, people fashioned in the image of Jesus Christ. That is some job! This is the work of a lifetime! God is not finished working with us yet!

The way that some people answer the summons of Jesus to live a good moral life is to be constantly focusing on where they may have failed and fallen short, trying always to keep in check any of those deep, dark impulses that might from time to time show themselves in actions that are unloving or unjust. As a result, many go through life like a cowboy rough-riding a wild bronco in a rodeo, holding back an unruly, surging force of dark passion and anger which, they feel, if the reins were relaxed for even a moment, those negative feelings would threaten to hurl them to destruction and ruin. The Sermon on the Mount does not command us simply to put a lid on our emotions—so that the kettle of lust, pride and anger might inwardly churn with flame and fury, while externally, observably, our actions appear to be all sweetness and light. We are called to recognize who we are, what we are, and then over time with the help of God’s grace discover how we can live in such a way that we are not at the mercy of our most negative impulses. Then, recognizing their origin, their triggers and even their morbid and morose satisfactions, we can cut them down in size, moderate the power they have over us, learn to live with our resentments, our antagonisms, our aversions in such a way that we can rise above them and simply do good, and be good.

Jesus challenges us to take a good look within ourselves—to recognize not only what we see as being good and creative about ourselves, but also what can be evil and destructive—to confront any ruthless drives to self-aggrandizement, which tend to impose our will regardless of the cost to others, and the many by-products of this murderous aggressiveness--the cruelty, the callousness, the possessiveness, the jealousy, the envy, the hatred and malice that can be part of our lives. To escape the pain of having to recognize those forces within us, we may try to disown or disguise that negativity. We may pretend to ourselves that the negativity does not even exist, that we are always nice, kind, fair and benevolent. That may be true most of the time. But the opposite may be true as well, that we can be disagreeable, nasty, petty and vengeful. And a great deal of psychic energy is spent in keeping those negative, destructive forces out of sight and out of mind. When goodness, then, is equated with just presenting a nice face to the world around us, and just trying to keep a lid on negative thoughts and feelings, that goodness is shallow and anemic. We are harboring dangerous enemies unawares, enemies that will take their toll eventually, regardless of our efforts to keep them under control.

Jesus does not come into our lives to indict us, to accuse us, to condemn us, to shame us, but to heal, to help, to save us—sometimes even to save us from ourselves. But to do that, He asks simply that we be honest with ourselves, that we do not just put on a good front in the manner of the Pharisees. We all have our “stuff” that we

have to deal with, and in today's Gospel Jesus recognizes just that. But, as He says in another part of the Gospels, "I have come to those who are sick, not for those who think themselves well." And that includes most of us here.

Let us pray that we can be honest with ourselves, that we can be open to God's healing grace, and that we take that next best step—however small that step may be—but take the next best step in our lives to grow in holiness, in wholeness and in health of the soul.