

In the minds of many people, today's gospel seems to provide an unachievable challenge. Not only do we have to behave ourselves, it seems we can't even *think* about doing anything wrong. It's probably not enough simply to explain that Matthew has Jesus using exaggerated language just for special emphasis. That might lead us to dismiss the passage as merely another example of an unfortunate Middle-Eastern custom. Perhaps Jesus has another message in mind altogether. Let me tell you a story and you can make up your mind for yourself.

My friend Evan drives down to midtown Manhattan several times a month to visit his customers. We were chatting about this gospel over a cup of coffee a while back, and he said it reminded him of the signs that said "Don't Even Think About Parking Here" everywhere he went. "It's impossible to park on the street down there," he complained. "Sometimes I think what Jesus is asking us to do in this gospel is just as impossible. Why does he talk to us like that?"

"Well, Ev," I told him, "you know you can actually park anywhere you want in midtown. You really don't have to pay any attention to those signs."

He looked at me as if I had two heads and said, "Park anywhere? Are you crazy?! I thought you were from New York. You know what'll happen. If I park by one of those signs and my car isn't towed away, I'll get a ticket that'll cost me two thirds of the Gross National Product. What are you talking about?"

"Oh, yeah, that'll happen," I replied, "but you'll have had the satisfaction of parking anywhere you wanted."

"I've never heard of anything so stupid," he remarked.

"Maybe that's what Jesus is saying," I suggested. "Want to sin? Go right ahead. Nobody's pushing you and nobody's stopping you. Your ego will feel powerful and in control, although you probably won't recall it later on as one of your finest moments. All the commandments, as we like to call them, are similar to your 'Don't Even Think About It' signs. Nobody's standing there to make sure you don't park there, but if you do, you shouldn't be surprised by disagreeable consequences. The sign, like the commandments, is there to help you decide to avoid doing the sub-optimal thing."

“Oh, OK,” Evan said, “I see where you’re going with that. But still, even if I decide I want to think only good thoughts non-stop, I can’t hire an armed guard to control what comes into my mind. All kinds of stuff percolates up in my brain. Yours too. Some things we’d be proud to tell each other, some we wouldn’t. All we have a shot at is knowing which stuff we’re going to act on and which we won’t, seems to me.”

“I’d agree with you on that, Ev,” I replied, “As they say, free will is more like ‘free won’t’, but maybe Jesus is going even deeper and asking us to develop habits of relating differently to these thoughts that come up.”

“What do you mean? Evan asked.

“Take a thought like anger, maybe at not being able to find your parking spot. You could simply notice it, take a deep breath, think of something to be grateful for anyway and continue looking, or you could launch into a big story about how New York is a dump and some worthless jerk is parking in the spot that you need right now and de Blasio is an idiot for letting this major inconvenience happen to you and so on into the night.”

“I’ve done both, Tim,” Evan admitted.

“Which leaves you in a better spot?” I asked.

“That should be obvious,” Evan replied, “Some of those stories I make up are like what’s that line - tales told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing? When my mind’s seething with these crazy stories, that’s when I act out and hurt other folks, and even myself. Then I get frustrated and angry at myself for having gone down another rabbit hole. It’s like there’s a library of bad tapes in my head. Why can’t I just push those thoughts away?”

“Maybe what you’re saying is closer to what Jesus was teaching,” I agreed. “You know, with thoughts, it’s very much the way St. Theresa of Avila said – the harder we try to ignore or push them away the more strongly they seem to hold on.”

“So how are we supposed to deal with them, Tim?” Evan asked.

“You were almost right when you said this was impossible, Ev,” I replied. “On our own, it is. But think, Ev, if Jesus was in the car with you, you really *wouldn’t* even think of parking someplace illegal, would you? Same with those thoughts. The key is to be alert enough in the

moment to look over the shoulder of the stuff that percolates up together with Jesus and ask where it's coming from. The choice will always be simply to notice them, aware of Jesus present with us, and gently let them go, or to grab on with a death grip and go for a walk on the wild side. Do we want our lives choreographed by crazy thinking or by Jesus and the Law of Love? The earliest Christians chose the latter, witnessed it in their lives and changed the world. What's it going to be for us?"

"That's heavy, Tim," Evan said, "I still just wish I didn't have to have thoughts like that," "Then you're wishing you weren't human, Ev," I replied. "Our brains serve thoughts up to us constantly because that's what brains do. God knows. God made them, and God did not make a mistake. The thoughts we choose to act out will express our choice for good or for evil in the moment. Clams and rocks don't have to choose between good and evil. We do. Making those choices is the crucible in which our destinies are forged. That's why Jesus didn't hold back from using strong language to convince us to be mindful of which thoughts we deliberately latch on to. He knew the power of thoughts and what was at stake. Those thoughts have a way of becoming who we are and what we habitually do."

"So, it's not really the thought, but those stories and acting them out that Jesus was warning us about?" Evan asked.

"I'd tend to agree, Ev," I said. "The sin that results from our acting them out reflects an unreal view of creation. When you and I sin big time, we disconnect from the reality that everything God created is held together in Christ, in love, and is very good. We choose to live in an isolated world of our own making, in which Jesus and the law of love have no part. It's the craziest of crazy stories, but in the moment, who do you think we think's the big winner?"

"Us?" Evan answered. "That's the second stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

"Agreed," I said. "Unreality's a loveless, dangerous spot to be in. You could call it hell and you might even be right. Whatever you call it, I think you'll agree no reasonable, loving person would ever even want to think about parking there."