

The Church of the Holy Cross
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 13, 2011
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Yesterday in a workshop on life's transitions here at the church our facilitator explained a helpful model of all major life changes. There is an ending, a neutral zone, and a new beginning. Endings are the times of letting go--they need to be named and grieved for the real loss that is part of all endings. The neutral zone is the theological and emotional landscape of wilderness--a time of chaos that is unnerving but creative--and in which we must resist the pressure to force ourselves through too quickly. And the new beginnings are the times of taking action again--these are met with excitement and anxiety. Human life in a nutshell: it's that simple, that clear, that easy. Within minutes I was reminded of the opening sentence in M. Scott Peck's book *The Road Less Traveled*, in which he writes, "Life is difficult."

But it was something our teacher said about the wilderness that really caught my attention. In the wilderness, she said, there is a radical dismantling of everything we know about ourselves and the world. Habits and behaviors are taken apart; patterns and routines are broken and changed; we are confronted with the need to let go of old standby practices. The old labels we used to have for ourselves don't work anymore: lawyer, teacher, parent; young, healthy, married. Old security blankets no longer comfort: parents, job market, a previously held image of God.

It is this force of dismantling that encounters us in the reading we have from Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. And if you haven't read through the whole thing get out the family Bible at home and read the three short chapters of Matthew: chapters five, six, and seven. It takes less than a half hour and you will be amazed at what you find.

"You have heard that it was said....," Jesus teaches, "But I say to you..."

Whether you believe Jesus is a rabbi or a prophet or really the eternal Word of God made flesh, the point here is "Pay attention--this is the definitive interpretation." The laws of Moses that have governed the Jewish people for centuries during all their endings, wildernesses, and beginnings are important, and they still instruct. What was already emerging was the forebear to the modern Christian interpretation of the Old Testament which can best be described as--and here I paraphrase: "Eh--take it or leave it--a lot of old dusty laws that don't really translate and really (let's face it) don't apply anymore". Who cares what all 630 plus laws say about when to wash your hands or how to cook a lamb?

But Jesus takes these laws and names them, "You have heard that it was said: 'You shall not murder' (Commandment number six in the book of Exodus); 'You shall not commit adultery' (Commandment number seven); 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce'; 'You shall not swear falsely...'" His point is "Pay attention--these are commandments of the holy God, not suggestions from an acquaintance. And after naming these commandments to make us aware of how important they are to remember, he goes and intensifies them!

"But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment...has anyone here ever been angry?
And if you say "You fool" (or any variation of this) you will be liable to the hell of fire...so be reconciled with your brother or sister..."

"But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart..."

“But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery...”,
“But I say to you, Do not swear at all...”

If you don't feel dismantled here, check your pulse or wake up. Jesus is thrusting us into a wilderness in which all our darkest secrets are exposed--not just our actions but our thoughts and words are here in wide open view for all the world to see: our capacity to lash out and hurt another person; our capacity to demean and dehumanize; our capacity to cut someone off emotionally for selfish reasons; our capacity to put ourselves and not God at the center of the universe. Old habits die hard and need breaking, and that's just what Jesus' sermon intends to do.

Later in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says “I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter.” Every careless word; every careless thought--I know for me there is a long list, longer than I may even realize. There is nowhere to hide. This is the discomfiting/unsettling side of that otherwise comforting Psalm 139: “Where can I go then from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” But in our hearts of hearts we feel like a little space might feel pretty nice.

This is no longer about a list of rules; this is about the will of God for humanity. You remember the Apostle Paul reminding his church in Corinth, “'All things are lawful', but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful, but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.” You can work the system with commandments--there is enough wiggle room to pass the buck or just get by--but here in Jesus we get a picture of the God who is Lord of all our bodies, all our decisions, all our relationships, all our desires, all our emotions. Couples will sometimes have separate bank accounts--but here we share the same bank account with God, and he sees all the receipts.

This is about God's intention for people not to damage each other, not to destroy anybody in thought, word, or deed. This is about God's intention for human beings to love God and to love one another--not to like or be nice but to love: to honor, to respect, to build up. You remember the verse, again from Paul: “love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful, but gentle, patient, and kind; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.”

But preacher, really, let's be rational. Isn't this just an example of literary hyperbole, of Jesus exaggerating something to make a point? And can't we chalk it up to something our Puritanical forebears, those religious kill-joys would have just reveled in? Or even if we do take Jesus seriously without taking him literally, who can do what he says? It seems a hurtle set up to make us fail.

Well since you asked, here's what I see Jesus doing in this sermon. The American novelist, playwright, poet, and civil-rights activist James Baldwin had a wonderful saying: “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.” Love in the person of Jesus takes off all the masks that cover our face, and it may not sound or feel so loving to us to have them stripped away, leaving our bare skin exposed. At the high risk of turning all hearers away, Jesus holds up the standard of God for human behavior and will not compromise God's will for a world reconciled in love. And the fact is, Jesus said clearly that “those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” All of us are in need of a divine Physician.

But there is one more part, for me the most encouraging and the heart of the good news. Jesus is inviting us into the spiritual life lived in daily relationship with God. We cannot meet God's standard on our own, but we were never intended to accomplish it on our own.

The dismantling process is a gut-wrenching conflict, and always has been. The Apostle Paul describes the conflict within himself when he tries to meet this standard, a force within him he cannot control revolts against the God-desire. “I do not understand my own actions...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it...” And here’s the power of it all: “Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” The Reformer Martin Luther said poignantly that whenever we begin to pray, or to love, or to do God’s will, there are forces that seek to distract us and sabotage us: conflict.

We cannot do God’s will or grow in holiness without depending daily on a closer relationship with God. The cross we bear is letting go of our ability to say: “Okay I got it from here, God; now leave me alone for awhile.” The spiritual journey is the adventure into the deeper life, into the rich soil of truth that says “Of course it is impossible to live to God’s standard without God.” Moving deeper we realize we were not created to go at life alone; we were not created to be autonomous self-willing individuals who control our decisions and outcomes with meticulous precision. We were created for deep and life-giving inter-dependency with our living Creator. Not dependence, not independence, and not co-dependence, but inter-dependence. We need God to make us able to love like God loves; to forgive like God forgives. We depend on God to give us what we need to do his will; and God depends on us to take the power for good he gives us and to put it to use for love’s sake.

With all due respect to one of my heroes Ralph Waldo Emerson and the American ethos of self-reliance, the Gospel good news is that we were not created for self-reliance. We were created for daily, deep, and continuous God-reliance. Anything else is someone trying to sell you something. And this is the illusion that Jesus’ sermon dismantles: Our culture offers an autonomous self accountable to none; the new self in Christ is accountable to God in obedience. Our culture offers an anxious self who is never safe or adequate; this new self is safe with God.

This sermon of Jesus’ is not some new-fangled law to make our life more difficult, more impossible. It is not the call to give up in despair or to shore up all your willpower--hands and face clenched in an act of excruciating effort. The sermon calls for the stance of palms turned open in calm expectation that the God who demands an ethic of holiness is the God who desires nothing more than to provide us with the continual ability to love, to forgive, to heal, to bless, to build up and not to tear down.

With palms and hearts turned open we now pray, “You made us and know us through and through O God. Now make us able to hear and do your will. Make us able to hear and do your will.”

Amen.