

The Church of the Holy Cross
Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
February 20, 2011
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Today we continue in Matthew's gospel, Jesus' definitive teaching moment in his short career. And I am reminded of two stories, one ancient and one modern. First the modern: In the comedy TV show 30 Rock, the Tina Fey character accuses CEO character Alec Baldwin of the cynical way he sees the world. Instead of seeing human beings, she says, all he sees is whatever worth he assigns them. And as turns to deny it, he looks out over his staff, and immediately dollar signs appear over their heads: \$7 over Kenneth, \$20 over Liz Lemmon, \$50 over Jenna Maroney.

When Jesus begins this Sermon on the Mount, you remember he teaches his hearers how to see the world and the people in it. Despite the church's efforts to sentimentalize this teaching, it still remains an odd, and even peculiar way to see: When you see the poor and the poor in spirit, see those who are closest to God, Jesus teaches; when you see those who mourn, see them comforted and made whole; when you see the meek, those who hunger for what is right, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers--see children of the living God who have God's powerful blessing upon them. And the implication is, "So you hearers of this sermon, treat these people with the utmost respect, value them as much as you value your own life or the life of a king or queen or president. They are worthy. Truth be told, it is these people who will write your recommendation for the kingdom of heaven--so best make sure it's a good one." So much more than a litany of good advice, this is an invitation to see the world as God sees it.

Second story is an old one. In the time before the printing press made books available, long before Kindles, Barnes & Noble and Borders, no one read or heard the Bible in their own language. There were scholars to translate from Greek and Hebrew, but no way to give people access to books. Church services were in Latin, so if you were English or French or Spanish or German just to name a few, you only knew the stories through art or perhaps through snippets passed down from grandparents to parents to children. When Gutenberg's printing press got going in 1454, and when people started getting their hands on the stories of Scripture, it was like fireworks going off: people could barely believe what they were seeing and hearing and learning. It's no wonder the Reformation exploded shortly after the Scriptures were translated.

In this world the English scholar Thomas Linacre translated his own vernacular copy of the Gospels. It was at the end of his life when he completed this. And as he read his work in his own native tongue--a first ever copy--he is reported to have said, "Either this is not the Gospel, or we are not Christians."

When we hear this section of Jesus' Sermon--this call to non-retaliation, this call to impractical generosity, this call to love and pray for enemies, this call to perfection--I imagine we hear this and then look around at the church and our culture, I imagine we look at our own instincts of right and wrong, and think, "Either this is not the Gospel, or we are not Christians."

How can we not call Jesus' words into question? The eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth concept we get. This was an old law that kept retaliation fair--it put limits on what you could demand in response to an affront: only an eye for an eye, not an eye and a leg...we understand this. "But I say to you, forego your right to retaliate at all." The law allows you to demand retribution, but Jesus refuses this as an option for Christians: choose the path of inner disarmament, he instructs. Not only this, but we are to treat evildoers with generosity,

exposing the other cheek, giving your shirt as well as your coat, going a second mile after someone unfairly forces you to go the one mile, giving to everyone who wants to borrow from you.

Now I will just say this out loud: to take Jesus literally would be to follow bad advice. I get the non-retaliation theme, but I like to think I would not stand by and let someone be mistreated--or myself; I like to think that I would not enable someone's harmful addictions by giving to them whenever they ask or doing whatever they want me to do. Not only does this hurt me, it allows injustice to go unchecked.

And interestingly enough, Jesus was no wilting violet. He called the Pharisees to account, he drove out the corrupt money-changers in the Temple, he got angry at diseases that stripped people of life and he cured those diseases; got angry with the resignation to evil that he encountered in people; he called people out of addictive behaviors into the freedom of responsibility filled with God's daily help. Jesus knew the world we live in: "Lock your car doors if they're not in a garage," my neighborhood watch just warned us--and that is just in my safe little cul-de-sac. The Jericho road as you may remember where the Good Samaritan got his name was not a safe place.

There is a way to take Jesus seriously here, without needing to take him literally. But the point of this instruction cuts deep, all the way to the bone. We may chuckle a bit at the unreasonable nature of it and settle back into our comfortable mindset: "nice up to a point," I might paraphrase it.

The fact that we find Jesus' radical, sacrificial instruction to love so impossible to fulfill does not in fact call Jesus into question. That we cannot imagine a world safe enough or loving enough, one in which there is a holy respect for the dignity of every human being, one in which the love of God is shown by every person and every institution and every nation by honoring other people and institutions and nations--that we cannot dare imagine what this looks like, that there is a part of us that finds this a polyanna ridiculous exercise in futility: peace in the Middle East; gentleness among nations; healing and forgiveness and respect in our own families; the weapons industry converting to the farming industry; prison buildings becoming places of worship--the fact that these thoughts are so ironic is the indictment of our whole world.

Jesus refuses to go along with the conventions of this world. He is the holy one calling this world into question. He refuses to recognize the law that you must run with the pack. Behind the words of this Sermon is the sad knowledge that God and this world are at cross purposes. We see these cross purposes on the cross the world hung him on.

The good news and the hard news: we are called to be the salt and light of this truth, this cross-purpose. We are called to the inward continual conversion of the person who sees more and more as God sees... The more we see like God, the more we live like God, the more the world gets a glimpse of what God is like. It is the calling of a lifetime: not merely to follow a commandment, but to participate in the nature of God. God needs you to show the world what God looks like.