

"But I Say"
Matthew 5: 21-37

February 16,2020

6th Sunday After the Epiphany

It's interesting how people will react and what they will say when caught doing something that appears to be wrong. I thought of this the past week as the Houston Astro sign stealing scandal blew up. If you're a baseball fan or a casual viewer of sports, you know that the Astros' baseball team was found to be cheating during the 2017 season when they won the World Series by using technology to steal the signs given by the catcher to the pitcher indicating what pitch was coming next. This naturally gave the Houston batters a tremendous advantage. When asked to explain their answers by the press at spring training, what they say? They couldn't admit to it because it might get them into more trouble. They couldn't deny it because there was tangible evidence that they cheated. They couldn't ignore it because that would've angered an already an angry fan base.

But I thought of one thing they could say. It's a phrase that many people use when caught doing wrong and they don't want to admit it. It gets you off the hook and puts your accuser on the defensive by shaming him for even calling your behavior into question. Perhaps it's a phrase that you have used. When confronted with wrong actions, simply say, "Well, it's not like I murdered anybody." It's as if all seemingly minor offenses can be excused, overlooked, or denied as long as no major rules were violated. In fact, such actions can even be justified and defended because they are not so serious.

Many people, including, perhaps, you and me on occasion, have the same view of God's Law. If something is not a major crime, why sweat it? Not only should we not be condemned for what we do, but we can defend our actions and justify ourselves. When any of our actions are called into question, we can simply reply with, "Well, it's not like I murdered anyone;" "It's not like I had sex with another woman;" "It's not like I robbed a bank." It is this trivializing of sin and erroneous view of judgment that Jesus is addressing in our Gospel reading for today from the Sermon on the Mount.

You may be thinking, "But didn't the Jews already have a very strict view of God's law?" What about the scribes and Pharisees? We often think them as being the villains in so many stories we learned in Sunday School. They were portrayed as being strict and unrelenting in forcing people to obey the Law to the nth degree. One might think that, because of their attitude, they were trying to make the law harder, even impossible, to obey.

Actually, it's just the opposite. As one seminary professor told me, the scribes and Pharisees were trying to make the law easier to obey by making it appear to be doable. Jesus challenges that assertion.

Jesus begins by saying, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'" Although it may sound harsh, what was actually being said is that, as long as you did not physically end the life of another human being, you were in compliance with this commandment.

Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'" Again, this sounds pretty strict and straightforward. However, in the application of this Commandment, as long as you did not physically have sexual intercourse with a person not your spouse, then you're not guilty.

Jesus says, "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'" While the religious establishment of the day was still against divorce, the thrust of their enforcement was making sure that you did your divorce in a proper way with a properly authorized certificate. If the legal procedures were followed, then the divorce was acceptable.

Jesus says, "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.'" This one was viewed much like the commandment on divorce. Prohibitions against swearing were relaxed if you did what you swore you were going to do.

These were interpretations by sinful human beings. Although they sounded very religious and reasonable, they were not based on the Word of God. Instead, the clear Word of God was reinterpreted and watered down so that keeping the Commandments might be doable.

Such interpretations delude us into thinking that we are better than we are. Much of what we do, we think, is not all that serious. In fact, some of our sins are not sins at all. Although we are often angry and speak insults or call names; although we are watching movies, viewing websites, and so on which are sexual in content; we are just fine. After all we are not murdering people or having sex outside of marriage.

Some may wonder what Jesus is doing here. He is not correcting or criticizing the Word of God, although, as its author, he certainly could have. He is not establishing a newer and stricter order of morality than what the Holy Scriptures already had. Jesus' disagreement is not with the Word of God, but with its interpreters and interpretations. Whenever Jesus referred to the Word of God, He always said, "It is written." Here, Jesus says, "it has been said." Jesus is condemning the interpreters of the Holy Scriptures and not the Scriptures themselves.

What Jesus is doing is giving an extended interpretation of the Torah, the books of the Law. His interpretation is much more difficult than the scribes and the Pharisees had prepared. The commandment against murder also includes a condemnation of anger, insults, and name-calling. Anger qualifies you for judgment. You deserve condemnation from the Jewish Council for insulting someone. And name-calling earns hell for you.

Adultery includes, not only wrongful sexual intercourse, but also wrongful use of your eyes and minds. Lustful intent is equated with adultery. As far as divorce goes, there is no proper divorce. Later on in his ministry, when Jesus was asked to take sides over what constitutes a lawful divorce, he refuses to choose. He says to the Pharisees, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let man not separate." (Matthew 19:4-6)

The same is true for swearing. In everyday discourse, there is no proper swearing. There is no need for it, according to Jesus.

What is Jesus' solution to these questions of the Law? Instead of trying to find a way to justify your anger and make it all right, Jesus encourages reconciling with the brother with whom you are angry. Do it before you come to church to offer your worship. For you cannot be reconciled with God if you are not reconciled with your brother. Nothing is more important than reconciliation.

Instead of exposing yourself to temptations of lust, thinking it is all right as long as you don't act on it, Jesus encourages extreme avoidance of sexual temptation at all costs. Instead of trying to find the proper way to divorce, avoid divorce at all costs. Reconcile instead. Instead of swearing by this or that thing, don't swear at all. When asked to verify something, simply say "yes" or "no".

Now Jesus is not establishing a sort of Canon Law to encourage more strictness nor providing some sort of guidelines for meeting out punishment for such a stricter law. Jesus doesn't want to get into a discussion about when anger is justified, whether gouging out eyes or lopping off hands can really help you avoid lust, the grounds for a God pleasing divorce, or by what you can properly swear.

Rather, Jesus is showing the completely crushing nature of the Law of God. We cannot be justified by God by doing our best to avoid sins. We cannot think our behavior is acceptable simply because we have not committed so-called, "big sins" or if we have proper justification for committing the sin. Jesus' point against the scribes and Pharisees is that there is no possible way we can adequately keep the Law. The law suppresses pride and self-confidence. It cannot lead to satisfaction or hope, but only despair and damnation.

What do we do? Remember how Jesus began this Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes. The very first one is most important for us as we hear Jesus' words today: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The "poor in spirit" are those who realize that they have absolutely no ability to keep the Law of God as He requires and absolutely nothing to bring to God in order to gain forgiveness and justification by God.

Our behavior is superficial, at best, and incomplete. It cannot be anything else for us as sinful human beings for sin has infected not only our behavior, but our thoughts, our feelings, and our desires. To really recognize this is to repent. Instead of trying to justify ourselves by making excuses for our sin, turn in faith to God to have yourself be made right with him.

Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Instead of guilt over the sins we admit and weariness from trying to come up with reasons to excuse the sins we don't admit, come to Jesus. He promises rest for your souls through the forgiveness of your sin and the comfort of His grace.

Come to the cross and see the effect of all of your sins, not just the big ones. Here, Jesus took the burden of your sin from you – all sins, both big and small, of thought, word, in addition to deed – and paid the price for them.

Come to the Church to be cleansed in Holy Baptism instead of trying to clean up your act on your own. Live in that baptism, that cleansing, every day of your life.

Come to the sanctuary and hear the life-giving message of the Gospel in which Christ forgives all of your sins – not just the big sins, not just the obvious sins, and not just the sins that you feel –, but also the small sins (a category which does not exist for God), the hidden and overlooked sins, and the sins which you don't even feel. Christ died for them all. He forgives them all.

Come to the altar and receive, in the very body and blood of Jesus, which give you comfort and peace through the forgiveness of past sins and the strength and support in future behavior.

And what is that behavior look like? Jesus' all-inclusive dissertation on the Law is not simply intended to be a quick springboard to the Gospel so that we might feel better again. Instead, we are to see the Law of God as He sees it and not in the superficial way that we usually do. If all of this is serious to God then it is to be serious to us as well.

We are not to continue in sin so that God's grace may abound. We are to actively strive to live as the Law proclaims, looking to the Word of God for instruction in the content of God's will, support as we strive to follow that will, and God's grace and mercy in the Word and Sacraments when we fail. This obedience is not the cause of salvation, but the result of it. This obedience is not a replacement for faith, but the fruit of faith. This obedience is not to anger us, but fill us with joy as His dear children do His will.

There are many voices out there speaking about what we should and should not do. They all want our attention. Some say there is no right or wrong. Some say we can determine right and wrong for ourselves. Some, especially within the Church, would say only the really bad things qualify as sin, but most of it doesn't matter. Which voice will you listen to? Many of the voices seem to make sense and make us feel better about ourselves. But Jesus says to us, "Although the Law crushes you, the Gospel gives you life. Come to me and you will find rest for your souls in the forgiveness of your sins, the comforting presence of My love, and in the power of my Holy Spirit." Listen to Him for what He says is right. You will find peace for your souls, strength for your obedience, and hope for Your life. Amen