

Living as Salt and Light

6th Sunday after Epiphany; Series A

Matthew 5:21-37

My youngest brother and I are thirteen months apart. As I am sure most of you can guess, the closeness in age inevitably led to a lot of fights and arguments between the two of us. This made things especially difficult for my mother who was always playing the referee, officiating play time, and making tough judgment calls. I cannot recall all of the fights and arguments I had with my younger brother while growing up, but I can, with great clarity, remember the skill of my mother in dealing with the two of us.

In one particular situation my brother did what he always did, he got on my nerves and started taking and playing with my new Ninja Turtle figurines rather than his own. As I was standing off to the side glaring at my brother and contemplating in my own mind what I would do about this situation I heard the unexpected voice of my mother, "Joshua Christopher, don't you even think about it!"

Now, as I am sure all of us know, mothers have this uncanny ability to say something to their children in a way that causes them to simply stop dead in their tracks. For my mother the sharp, serious tone of voice combined with the use of my full first and middle name was akin to a law enforcement officer pointing a gun and barking, "Freeze, you're under arrest!" But what law had I broken? And of course that was precisely my appeal to my mother, "What, I didn't do anything wrong?"

We can all relate to a story like this, can we not? The problem in those kinds of situations is not that we had actually *done* anything wrong. The problem is that we had *thought* and *plotted in our minds* about doing something wrong. For my mother, it made no difference; I was just as guilty for thinking up a plot of vengeance against my brother as I was for actually carrying it out.

This relationship between thought and action has been explored by Hollywood as well. The movie, *Minority Report*, starring Tom Cruise, takes place in the future at which point a special police force is able to arrest murderers *before* they actually commit the act of murder. This correlation between our thoughts and our actions and the recalling of our various experiences is helpful for us this morning as we seek to reflect on Jesus' words in our Gospel reading.

Jesus knows all too well the truth that a thought precedes and leads to an action. This morning Jesus presents the heart of God, the Father, to us. In his famous Sermon on the Mount Jesus presents to us as his disciples God's clear Will and intention from the beginning of creation. It is God's Will that we do not murder. This means he desires that we do not even allow hatred, the seed of murder, to be planted in our hearts and minds. It is God's Will that we do not commit adultery. This means he desires that we do not even allow lust for another, the seed of adultery, to be planted in our hearts and minds. It is God's Will that "man should not separate" (Mt 19:6) those he joins together in holy matrimony. This means that from the beginning of creation divorce is not God's ideal or intention or Will. It is God's Will that we be honest in our speech toward one another. This means he desires that we simply let our "yes" be "yes" and our "no" be

“no.” Such is the authoritative teaching of God, our Heavenly Father that Jesus gives to us as his blessed disciples. He gives us God’s Will and intention from the beginning of creation.

As Jesus presents each of the four teachings of the Will of God to his disciples in our Gospel reading he says the phrase, “You have heard that it was said” (Mt 5:21, 27, 31, 33). Jesus is interacting with the interpretation of these teachings that was common during his time. There was a tendency at the time of Jesus to interpret the commandments of God very narrowly, in such a way that put emphasis *solely* on the outward act. According to this interpretation of the Pharisees and Scribes, a person was breaking the Fifth Commandment, “Do not murder,” *only* if that person actually murdered a person. This kind of interpretation allowed the religious leaders of Jesus’ time to create their own path of righteousness before God. As long as they followed the path of their interpretation and did not *actually* murder they believed that they could be counted as having obeyed the Will of God completely.

As Jesus presents each of the four teachings of the Will of God to his disciples, he also says the phrase, “But I am saying to you” (Mt 5:22, 28, 32, 34). It is as if Jesus is saying, “The real problem with murder starts well before the outward act. The real problem is the seed planted in the soil of the heart that allowed that murderous act to become fully grown (James 1:15). That sin is the hatred, anger, and jealousy that a person has toward another. The act of murder starts there. Since it is your Heavenly Father’s Will and intent that we do not murder, it is also his Will and intent that we do not even hold onto a thought of hatred towards another. Even that is missing the mark. Even that is a Sin.”

So how does Jesus’ authoritative teaching about murder, adultery, divorce, and the taking of oaths function for you and me today as his disciples? We are saved by God’s grace, trusting in the death and resurrection of Jesus to pay for our Sins against God and against one another. We are right with God based upon what Jesus has done and not what we have done or have to do. So what role do Jesus’ words about murder, adultery, divorce, and the taking of oaths have for us?

Similar to the expectations we set for our children who live under our roof or the set of expectations we receive from our parents when we lived under their roof, this teaching of Jesus is a set of expectations and teaching on the Ten Commandments that shows *how we ought to live* as the children of God in this world, in the household of our holy God. As the Old Testament reading reminds us, we are to be holy as our God is holy. This teaching of Jesus shows us how we ought *to be* God’s baptized, blessed disciples. His teaching shows us how we ought to behave and treat one another. We live as people of confession and absolution. We confess our Sin and disobedience of God’s Will and we receive his absolution and forgiveness on Sunday morning. We give God’s forgiveness in Christ to the one who has hurt us and we receive forgiveness from another when we have hurt and wronged them. This is the rhythm. That is to say we live as people of repentance. We live as the forgiven people of God.

Because of the one who suffered on the cross for all of the evil intent and will of mankind, we have been declared innocent, guiltless, and free of the guilt against our God’s Will. We have been freed from his condemnation. Trusting in that verdict as blessed, baptized believing children of God we are then called to be his blessed disciples. We are to be the salt of the earth. We are to be the light of the world. So how do we respond when we have broken and violated even the Will and intent of our God? What does Jesus say? Get rid of it! Confess Sin to God. Receive, live in, and give his forgiveness.

Like the religious leaders of Jesus’ time we may find all kinds of ways to justify ourselves. We may try to claim that we have done nothing wrong because we are innocent of committing the sinful act. Brothers and sisters, in the eyes of God

it makes no difference. He simply desires that we lay down the reasons and excuses before the foot of the cross. In doing so we are honest with ourselves and with God. We call a thing what it is. We call Sin a Sin. We call an immoral and impure thought an immoral and impure thought. We call imperfection an imperfection. We admit that we are Imperfect. This is the best place to be. This is the place where God wants us. Then he can give us his perfect grace. Then he can give us his perfect forgiveness through the gift of his perfect Son. Then he can give us his Spirit to empower us to live in his grace and forgiveness as salt and light. Amen.