

Year A - 6th after Epiphany - 12 February 2017
Matthew 5:21-37

As I sat down to prepare this sermon I began thinking about how harsh this gospel sounds compared to how we usually hear Jesus' voice. Ask many people what they know of Jesus and you will hear about the shepherd, the healer, the one who prayed, the Lamb of God. None of these images bring to mind adjectives like harsh, hard or demanding. And yet, here we are face to face, not with the more popular version of Jesus as gentle shepherd, but instead closer to the man we hear about angrily overturning the tables in the temple. So the question becomes "which Jesus do we listen to"? Do we lend our ears to the gentle Jesus, meek and mild or do we sit up and pay attention to a man who seems angry, perturbed and impatient? To answer the question, we need to leave our desire for 'either/or' behind us and lean into the 'both/and' conundrum. In reality we need to pay attention to the complexity of Jesus, acknowledging the totality of his message, its impact and importance, rather than cherry-picking what works best for us in the here and now.

As we read today's passage from Matthew we do so needing to remember that God didn't just randomly choose to break into humanity and incarnate God's-self at this particular time just for the fun of it. In Jesus' time, the world was in an uproar. The Romans were swarming all over the Holy Land. There hadn't been a prophet to proclaim God's law in centuries. From God's perspective, it would be quite reasonable to say that all hell was breaking loose on earth, and so, God arrived, in Jesus' form, to begin the process of peace-making and healing and bringing about God's Kingdom on earth. Hence, Jesus did not just come to gently say 'how about you try this way of living and see if it works better for you'. He came commanding his followers, all believers - then and now - to follow him in a new way of being. If gentleness works, then gentleness it is. However, in an emergency, when time is of the essence, subtlety is not always an option. Sometimes hard truths have to be faced quickly and abruptly. And when that is what is needed, even Jesus responds that way.

Over the past couple of weeks you may have noted that there is a heightening sense of urgency in the gospel; in Jesus' teachings. We have moved from the first few Beatitudes that seem to tell the weak, the hungry, the unfortunate, that they should be patient and wait, in eternity all shall be well. (As a matter of fact, there have even been Christian churches throughout the years that have used these first Beatitudes to remind the 'lower classes' to mind their station and just 'wait for their time to come'.)

After those first few Beatitudes, we moved into the ones that were calls to action for those who were truly listening. We were called to step out in faith: to be merciful; to be pure in heart; to be peacemakers; to face persecution; to speak up for our faith even if we are being ridiculed and lied about ...

And then Jesus went even further, demanding that we become salt and light in the world. No longer could we mistakenly interpret Jesus' words to mean that we should stay in our own homes, our own circles where everything is comfy and safe,

sharing all of this good news with like-minded people. With his salt and light expectations he is charging us to get out there, out into the world and into those nooks and crannies of society where salt is needed and where darkness prevails – our light required to bring hope to the hopeless.

And now he is holding a mirror up to us, the very people he has entrusted so much to; the ones that he has commissioned to go out in search of others in need. Now he is demanding of us a purity of heart and life that goes well beyond 'being a good, Christian person'. Not only are we not to murder, an expectation that we can all fairly easily live up to, but now he is charging us with not even holding on to anger! He has moved beyond the expectation that we won't cheat on our spouses, which seems an obvious expectation for a good Christian, and he is raising the bar to command us to not even look with lust upon another person. And divorce, well that seems pretty self-explanatory ...

But as easy as it may be to say that we, as good Christian people, don't fall prey to any of these sins, I think we, most of us anyway – myself included – would have to slow down and consider our own consciences for a moment. I have never committed murder, but there have been too many times than I care to think of when I have held onto anger. For the past 30 years of my teenage and adult years, there have been many times when I have not set aside my anger and tried to reconcile with someone before I have come to the altar to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. (Sometimes, however, it has been in receiving that reconciling sacrament that I have been given both the strength and the humility to walk back to my pew, into my life and seek healing and forgiveness from a person I have wronged or who has wronged me.)

I have never cheated in my marriage but there have been many times that, I am ashamed to say, I have 'lusted' after what others have. A house of our own, fewer bills, a fancier car, a vacation in the sun during the cold of the winter. It is hard *not* to lust or covet after something or someone that we see and wish could be ours. Accepting and appreciating what we have and who we are *in the present moment* can be really tough sometimes.

And divorce ... I am married to a man who is divorced. I have had to struggle with this passage since I first met Rob. The closest I can come to reconciling this is the truth that I would never have wanted Rob or his boys to go through the pain and the challenges that come when sacramental relationships fail. I only know that together, he and I work daily to ensure that our marriage is one of openness and honesty, uplifting one another in the present, as there is nothing we can do now about what happened long ago.

Nowhere in the life or teaching of Jesus are we given the impression that we already have it figured out and have nothing new to learn or struggle with. Jesus was, is and always will be the only one who can stand in perfection and state with impunity that his way is the only right and perfect way. No matter who we are, how old we are, how long we have been baptized or confirmed, not one of us is exempt from the gigantic and enormous expectations Jesus has on our very lives.

But that's a hard truth to grapple with isn't it? It is so much easier to say that we don't really need to go out into the world sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ

because 'they will know we are Christians by our love' ... No, they won't. Too many people have been brought up in a Judeo-Christian world in which the 'right and proper ways to live' are just that – the right and proper ways to live because society says so. Living a good Christian life without actually stepping it up, raising the bar, living to that greater expectation is not enough, even if we might want it to be ... In this day and age they will not know we are Christians by our love. They just won't. They will only know we are Christians if we tell them.

This is hard, isn't it? This is frustrating. This is even frightening. Jesus expects us to go that extra step, to live to that higher standard, to reach out to others just that much further ...

And that is the conundrum of being a Christian today.

We can choose to pay attention only to the words and actions of Jesus that are gentle and mild and shepherd-like.

We can choose to ignore the tougher stuff, the moments when Jesus steps out of that neat and tidy role that allows us to feel comfortable where we are.

Or we can acknowledge that he never said we are to be comfortable, especially when there are so many around us who have no comfort whatsoever ...

We can learn what it is to live with the 'both/and' Jesus who demands so much of us but gives us eternal life in return.

Or we can simply choose the either/or option and follow him only when it is easy ...

We are called and expected to join Jesus in the 'both/and' life of receiving the comforts of the gentle Jesus and accepting the challenges of the demanding Saviour but, ... if we aren't there yet, the 'both/and' Jesus still says that we are welcome at his table, we are loved into eternity, even if we can't respond as he wants us to. Because, you see, Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour is the Son of God for both the Christians who follow his command and the Christians who still struggle to commit.

Both/and ... In the end, Jesus doesn't say to us, "either you do this or else". But he does say to us you are *both* welcome *and* loved, just as you are ...