

Epiphany 6, Year A
February 13, 2011
St. Michael and All Angels, Portland
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Deuteronomy 30:15-20 and Psalm 119:1-8 • 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 •
Matthew 5:21-37

I think I'd almost rather preach on Black Swan than on this Gospel reading! But I haven't seen Black Swan so I'll just have to preach on the text.

I have to admit this reading is tough. What it sounds like on the first hearing is this: "you think keeping the commandments is hard? I'll show you hard! It's not enough to just stay out of trouble, you have to be better than that."

"Well, Lord, we're having a hard enough time with the basics still, to be honest. Can we stick to that until we get it?"

So, let's get a little deeper into this conversation and its context and see what we can mine from this particular vein of riches, even if it seems too deep to possibly be worth the effort.

There is an under-current in the thinking about this passage that I think is wrong-headed. Some commentators clearly see Jesus being cast in the role of Lawgiver, a new Moses for a new chosen people. Though I will not deny the resonances between the story of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel and some elements of the life of Moses, it's false to imply or assert that the Law was flawed or not good enough without qualification, so it was superseded by Jesus' teaching. You've surely heard this argument.

But we heard Jesus say in the Gospel reading just last week, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Not to tear down, but to complete. Not to destroy, but to illuminate. Not to discard, but to embody.

What Jesus is talking about in these verses is actually very much a part of a larger conversation well within the bounds of Jewish learning and argument about the Torah, the commandments or *mitzvot*, and the covenant.

But first, let's shelve this word "Law" for a while. In our heads, law has good connotations about order and fairness and bad connotations about rules and bureaucracy and byzantine documents and arguments that require a degree to engage in. In religious matters, thanks in part to Paul, Law is what Christ's grace freed us from. And that's not wrong, but let's just set that word aside for a moment.

Let's begin with the word Torah, which is the Hebrew word which is translated as Law. Torah means much more than a legal code. Torah means "instruction" and, in some usages, includes not just the legal codes in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, but also the entire books themselves, with all their stories. The Torah is huge, visible and invisible, oral and written, endlessly deep. By Jewish tradition, there is not just the written Torah, but also the oral Torah, the rabbinical commentary on the Scriptures known as the Mishnah and the Talmud. Some go beyond even that and use Torah to talk about the whole of God's self-communication, the way in which God went completely out of God's way in order to bring human beings into God's own life. Some mystics even claim that Torah is a mirror of life, God's power reaching across the chasm of being between the Divine Self and our human frailty, coursing through our days and hours, our stories, our struggles, our bodies, our living and dying.

In Jesus' time this oral Torah was not yet recorded so the various authorities in Jewish religious life and practice still engaged in a great deal of discussion and argument and decisions over the implications of the written Torah on life as it was lived.

Within the Torah, there are commandments or *mitzvot*: do this. don't do that. remember this. don't forget that. In the time of Jesus and shortly thereafter there was an ongoing argument about what constitutes the fulfillment of a *mitzvah*. Some rabbis said all that is required is the action: doing what is commanded or refraining from what is forbidden. Simple as that.

Others said that the action part of the mitzvah is only one of three essential components: the divine command, the behavior or action, and the *kavannah*, the intention of the one performing the mitzvah.

I think Jesus was wading into this conversation by saying, "Look, just doing or

not doing the letter of the *mitzvah* is not the point. **The *mitzvot* are a gateway to communion with God, to embodying holiness and goodness in this world that needs it so much. Ultimately, the *mitzvah* changes not just the body and the world. It also must change the heart.**”

So Jesus teaches us to approach the *mitzvot* looking for the intention we are embodying as we perform it. Without all three elements lining up--the commandment, the intention, and the action--the gateway remains closed. But with all these resonating together God’s loving faithfulness manifests in the world through this fragile and tricky human flesh, here today and gone tomorrow.

So why the injunction against anger as well as murder? Because the commandment “Do not murder” intends to lead us beyond destructive aggression towards other human beings who deserve our compassion and reverence as images of God. It is possible to live an entire life honoring the commandment not to murder in the body while entertaining all kinds of hatred and rage, the desire to belittle and destroy another human being. Without the intention to honor the life placed in another by God, the gateway of the *mitzvah* remains closed.

The same is true with the injunction against lust as well as adultery. Having inappropriate or destructive sexual relations that break the promises we have made to others and to God is only the end of a path that begins with entertaining the craving for others as objects to be consumed and discarded rather than as subjects with their own lives and stories, worthy of respect and safety. In this realm, it is easy to rationalize that I am not breaking the rules because, as Bill Clinton said, “I did not have sex with that woman, Ms. Lewinsky.” Unless we can train our hearts to choose faithfulness time after time, to reflect the unfailing love of God for us and our world in our relationships, inside and outside, the gateway of the *mitzvah* remains closed.

And so we come to what is, for me, the hardest saying to take of the lot: the prohibition of divorce. In our culture and in our church, we have moved a great deal on this question, as most of you are aware, even given this seemingly unequivocal instruction in the Gospels. My parents were divorced, and the truth is that it was probably the best course of action available to us as a family. So what’s the point of this injunction? That my parents should have stayed married and perhaps separated

for life, or stayed in the same house with one another, wretched and wreaking havoc and destruction all around them until death parted them? I cannot imagine that our compassionate Lord would have condemned us all to that fate.

But let's look at the *kavannah*, the intention to be honored in the commandments around marriage and divorce, however they stand. I think the intention is this: people are not expendable commodities to be picked up and dropped. In the ancient world in particular, women and children were often vulnerable to poverty and marginalization after divorce. Our significant relationships and responsibilities towards our intimates endure beyond their usefulness to us. Is it honoring this *mitzvah* to stay in a destructive or abusive marriage, or worse, a marriage that has died, as if we owned the other person? Or is there a way to release one another from our vows of marriage that honors the fullness of the other person and does not poison what relationship and good will may remain?

These are difficult questions without easy answers. Yet this is where we begin to live the Torah, God's loving self-communication, in our lives. It is not enough to honor the letter of the teaching while dishonoring its spirit. It is not enough to stay out of trouble. It is not enough to be a nice person.

We are in a crucible of transformation. In our practice, we line up teaching, intention, and action and try the gate. If the combination is true, deeply rooted in the fabric of the universe as God has made it, then the gates of communion will open, and we will find ourselves in the Presence of the One who led us there the whole way, the One in whom we have come to recognize the fullness of God's self-giving Word, our own Living Torah, Jesus Christ, our Risen and Living Lord.

But that communion is not a private affair, just for ourselves! Through our good deeds and hearts made ready for grace, the light that illuminates the entire world can shine through the open gates of the fulfilled *mitzvah*. Through our actions, we can embody and imitate God's love, by God's grace. Amazingly enough, a huge, unending project like the repair of the world, the reconciliation of the world to God, begins with tending our own hearts and habits in order to make room for the light to shine through. The influence of our gracious good deeds ripples out into the web of our relationships, having consequences we can hardly imagine.

God has a dream for creation that, though it does not depend on our actions, invites our cooperation and co-creation. May we have the grace to give ourselves to that dream tirelessly and whole-heartedly.