

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany ~ February 12, 2017  
Sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Vélez Rivera

Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 119: 1-8, I Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 5:21-37

A couple of weeks ago, when Kurt Aschermann preached, he said how lucky he felt for having four great scripture readings to choose from and he felt that he could've just walked into church without preparing, and used any one of the lessons to preach from especially the gospel reading which was the Sermon on the Mount.

Well, that isn't the case with today's lectionary readings! This preacher is here to tell you that today's gospel reading from Matthew is quite the opposite, its historically one of the toughest gospels to preach from, there are even preaching books that include this lesson such as "Preaching the Hard Words of Jesus"! In the end, however, one is left asking what is God doing with this message today. Perhaps the purpose of such a lesson is that we wrestle with it, that we do the hard work of pulling the scripture apart to try to interpret it, but for what greater purpose?

I invite you to consider God's action as you wrestle with this scripture and to consider the **spirit** of God's intention. If God's action is love **and** the promise of life eternal, then perhaps what we must do as we interpret today's gospel is use the lens of love to consider the spirit of the law versus the letter of the law in the commandments and vows that we make to incorporate the commandments into our lives.

By giving the Ten Commandments and knowing the imperfection of the human creation first hand, I believe that God intended for us to obey the spirit of the law. In other words, that we do what God intended, and use our judgment in interpreting the word of the law. There is not one day that goes by when the technicalities, loopholes and ambiguous language of the letter of the law aren't exploited.

In today's gospel, Jesus presented the extreme cases of the vows we make in the commandments against murder, slander, adultery, and divorce. God knows that we can't adhere to the literal wording of each commandment all the time, we are perfectly imperfect and made in God's image. I am not a lawyer, and so I confess feeling that today's lesson makes me feel inadequate, that I'm in a bit over my head as I interpret it for myself and others because so many people have taken this scripture literally and cast judgments, damaging judgments, upon themselves and others. Perhaps we should all feel like we are in a bit over our heads when it comes to the vows one takes to follow God's commandments. We must also use the lens of love, because our Lord and Creator is the God of love, and the God of love gave his only begotten Son for love, and with the filter of love we can interpret the **spirit** of the law, relying solely on God's help to fulfill our vows. That is no license to be irresponsible, we are called to follow the commandments with God's help which is the most important piece of the puzzle.

Jesus referred to the commandments against murder, slander, adultery, divorce, and sworn vows. In reading the gospel I was drawn to the last statement where Christ said, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord". That puts us in a tough place each time we repeat our baptismal vows, except that when we commit to follow the apostles teaching, resist temptation, repent when we fall into sin, help the needy, do justice, love our neighbors and ourselves, and spread the Good News, we always conclude by saying, "I will, with God's help." God's action with us is the key, that is because we are in co-mission with Christ and that the commitment is mutual from God and to God. Before giving the commandment, God knew our inability to follow it to the letter, so we are given the spirit to help us follow the light. As Christians, we live in a state of tension with the vows we make to God knowing that perhaps we can commit ourselves to 40%, 50%, 80%, or 90% of the promises we make. We can use scripture to see how over time, the interpretation of the law changed as the times changed for our biblical ancestors.

Let's take the example of divorce for example because that is always a hot topic for those who like to take the word of God literally. The law in the Old Testament, stipulates that marriage is intended to be a permanent, covenantal relationship between a man, who was to protect and provide for his wife, and a woman, who was to remain monogamous to her husband. In the early first century, if you read what Paul had to say about divorce to the church in Corinth, his first Christian community, he follows what Jesus said in the gospel today. No way José! But in subsequent letters Paul made exceptions, though he liked to throw the word adulterer around - ouch! Yes, this from a disciple who didn't marry and proclaimed to his followers that true disciples should be celibate like he was, so that they could dedicate their lives fully to God; but then let's not forget that Jesus first miracle took place where? At a wedding ceremony! Go figure, love is the lens!

Paul himself had to interpret and reinterpret the spirit of the law to early Christians because life had its twists and turns then, and it still does now! From times before Christ to the present, the interpretation of the law changes as cultures and contexts change. The basis of any relationship must be love, and even the basis for a divorce must be love, love for self and love for others which is the great commandment that Jesus proclaimed.

One of the ten commandments says that we ought not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord. In today's gospel Jesus takes the commandment one step further by saying that we shouldn't swear at all, which means not to make vows or promises we can't keep. He knew people well, making a vow before God leaves us open to the possibility of breaking that promise to God and the other. But think about this, Christ left us with the Holy Spirit when he left the world, he gave us a spiritual advocate, the Holy Spirit, until his coming again. We therefore take oaths, vows, and pledges to follow the commandments, but, as our baptismal response says, we never vow to anything without God's help. God's help is a given. The Holy Spirit is with us in each vow we take and promise we make. In our baptismal

covenant, we affirm our co-dependence on the Creator and so we are co-missioned and committed to our Creator and our Creator to us. God is in action with us each time we say, "I will with God's help". Amen.