

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Year A

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

Baby Bottles at Midnight

“And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh.” - 1 Corinthians 3:1-3

For the last three Sundays we have been working on a theme of discipleship centering around Jesus' calling of his first disciples in Matthew 4 and then subsequent instruction to them in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. Three weeks ago we talked about how a disciple has a prepped heart that is looking for where God is showing up in this world. We talked about the holy audacity of Jesus to demand that he is the priority in a disciple's life. We talked about how to lose our own identity and take on the identity of Christ through the merciful work of God in our lives. Two weeks ago we eavesdropped in on Jesus' instruction of his disciples using the familiar teachings we now call the Beatitudes showcasing how life could be viewed if Jesus were the priority in our lives. Last week the Bishop focused us in on godly wisdom and pointed us towards the cross. And that brings us to today.

Murder / Adultery / Divorce / The Taking of Oaths

Jesus really jumps into the deep end of the pool pretty quickly!

But what Jesus is doing here is not anything all that unusual for a teacher of his day. What he is doing is taking the Old Testament Law of Moses and giving us his interpretation of it. It's not all that far off of what most preachers do every Sunday when they do their best to bring godly interpretation and explanation to the Scriptures. What is shocking is how far Jesus takes things!

Each of these topics are most certainly worthy of our time and discussion, however, today I want to zoom out a little and take a big picture view of something that God had been doing with his people for centuries, something that Jesus equally demonstrates for us in this passage today, and something that Paul puts voice to as well. When you have God, Jesus, and Paul all singing the same tune then we should probably stop and pay attention.

So, what is it that they are all saying?

My wife, Angela, and I came up with a phrase that we think sums up this big picture theme pretty nicely - baby bottles at midnight.

Imagine that you are a parent trying to get your infant settled down to sleep - hopefully through the night. One tried and true method is to feed them, but sometimes that feeding doesn't quite take them all the way through the night and they wake up in the middle of the night hungry and crying for more. It's time for another bottle, which often meant an elbow to the ribs and a sleepy comment from the wonderful wife lying next to you in bed, "It's your turn."

Baby bottles at midnight. Now, feeding a baby from a bottle is entirely appropriate if they are six months old. But what if they were six years old, and you were still having to get up and feed them from a bottle in the middle of the night! That's kind of how Paul feels about the Christians in Corinth when he sends them his letter. One paraphrase of this passage puts it this way, "But for right now, friends, I'm completely frustrated by your unspiritual dealings with each other and with God. You're acting like infants in relation to Christ, capable of nothing much more than nursing at the breast. Well, then, I'll nurse you since you don't seem capable of anything more." Paul is telling them that his expectation that they would show a little more maturity in their faith was not an unrealistic one. He was challenging them to grow up,

go deeper, embrace the wisdom of faith not the false wisdom of this world. They're missing the point and it's driving him a little batty like he was a sleepy father feeding a six year old from a bottle in the middle of the night.

But this isn't the first time God has been frustrated with his people for missing the point. You can go all the way back hundreds and hundreds of years into the Old Testament and hear God say similar things to the Israelites. Hear this from the prophet Jeremiah,

"Consider this: When I spoke to your ancestors after I brought them out of Egypt, I did not merely give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices. I also explicitly commanded them: 'Obey me. If you do, I will be your God and you will be my people. Live exactly the way I tell you and things will go well with you.' But they did not listen to me or pay any attention to me. They followed the stubborn inclinations of their own wicked hearts. They acted worse and worse instead of better." (Jeremiah 7:22-24) It's not just about sacrifices, it's about obedience.

Or this from the prophet Hosea,

"For I delight in faithfulness, not simply in sacrifice; I delight in acknowledging God, not simply in whole burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:6) But it was God who told the Israelites to perform all those sacrifices! And now he's acting like they've missed the point. Like he's having to do another bottle in the middle of the night with someone who shouldn't be a baby anymore.

In the psalms God says,

"Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?" (Psalm 50:13) God's saying, "Did you think my sacrifices were meant to feed me! Do you really think I need you to feed me as if I were the child and you the parent?"

At another point, with the prophet Isaiah (58:4-7) God rails against the Israelites for misappropriating what a true fast was. Fasting wasn't exclusively meant for me to go without as if I were a better person for it. Fasting was meant to go without so that those in need of justice and provision might be sustained and blessed. They'd missed the point! Another bottle in the middle of the night.

And that is what Jesus is driving at too with these four tough sayings in the middle of Matthew 5 about murder, adultery, divorce, and oaths. God has been looking for one thing all along and it wasn't the robotic following of his laws with our outside behavior. He is driving for our hearts, and our hearts alone! Actions can be hollow if they are not sustained by the faithful obedient humility of our hearts.

That's why Jesus says that murder is a condition of your heart and not simply an action of your hands.

That's why adultery isn't simply the result of lustful actions, it's a symptom of a lustful heart.

That's why Jesus is suggesting that divorce is symptomatic of a failure of the heart in the one - or both - who failed the marriage vows.

That's why Jesus says not to bother with oaths of words, but rather let the integrity of your heart speak for who you are.

God doesn't bother with simply knowing our actions because since he knows our hearts he therefore knows what actions our hearts will produce and what kind of disciples we will be.

In today's Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy Moses says this,

"If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. **But if your heart turns away** [you will be] led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them." (Deuteronomy 30:16-17)

Being a disciple is a heart issue and God wants our hearts to grow. He wants our hearts to produce fruit that will be a blessing to this world. He wants to move on from baby bottles at midnight to mature fruit in the light of day - in the light of the Son of God - in the light of Jesus! *Amen.*