

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany/February 12, 2017

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One day a visitor went to a monastery seeking for the purpose and meaning of life. The teacher said to the visitor, "If what you seek is the Truth, there is one thing you must have above all else." "I know," the visitor said. "To find truth I must have an overwhelming passion for it." "No," the Teacher said. "In order to find Truth, you must have an unremitting readiness to admit you may be wrong." The writer of the 3rd Letter of John says, "I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth."

If the Teacher is right, then the way of Truth or the way of God is something that we must seek over and over again. We may never get it completely right, in the same way that we never have perfect control over our lives. We must choose again and again. Multiple times Moses says, as the people are about to set foot in the Promised Land, I have set before you a choice. Three times Moses uses the word "today." Today is the day of decision. We don't just make a choice once. Each day is a moment to decide. What decisions lie before you and me this day? Are there persons we need to pay closer attention to? Do we need to treat ourselves with greater compassion? Are there things we can do to enhance our creativity in the workplace? Or at the most basic level do we choose arrogance or humility, willfulness or willingness?

Here is a story from those we call the desert fathers. They were 4th century Christians who fought against wrong and went to its source which they believed dwelt in the desert. They used the title Abba for each other which means "Father." Abba Moses asked Abba Silvanus, "Can a person everyday make a beginning of the good life?" Abba Silvanus answered him, "If one be diligent, then that person can every day and every hour begin the good life

anew.” The way of the Lord and the way of truth is one of continual choice. It doesn’t just happen once. After all, we might get it wrong. Every time we say the confession of sin we are choosing once again to walk in God’s ways. The lines at the end are what impress me most. We pray “that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name.” We can choose to begin the good life anew, to walk in God’s ways.

So what’s the choice? Moses puts it starkly. It is a matter of life and death. That is, the choice has an ultimate quality to it. It is well worth considering. To love is to walk in God’s ways which is a blessing. It means wellbeing. To be led astray, to refuse to listen to God’s word of love, is a curse, that is in Moses’ terms, the people of Israel will not live long in the land that has been promised them.

Paul sets out the choice before us just as clearly. Three times Paul uses the phrase “of the flesh.” He means divisiveness and quarreling. The Corinthians chose rival leaders and lost their sense of community. Sound familiar? We have been doing the same thing in our politics for 15 years. Alternatively Paul uses the possessive “God’s” three times. If they choose the way of the Lord, their leaders are God’s servants and they are God’s field and God’s building. They are unified in their relation to the one God. God’s is “the kingdom, and the power, and the glory” as we say in the Lord’s Prayer. We are empowered by God’s grace to choose the way of the Lord. It doesn’t just happen. It arises out of prayer and the strength that comes from God.

Jesus ups the ante in the choice before us. It is his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus’ heightened commandment is not just a matter of not murdering, he says, but pay attention to your anger. One can deal a death-blow by what spits out of our mouths. Words can be instruments that build up or tear down. For Jesus, to insult another is to question whether they are human. To withdraw love is to dehumanize. To say “You fool” is to question a person’s relationship to God. The 53rd Psalm begins, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” These are all ways, Jesus preaches, that we destroy another. As Paul would say, they are ways of the flesh. They lead to division.

Jesus ups the ante. His heightened commandment is not just a matter of not committing adultery but a question of lust. Lust is more than sexual envy; it is a willfulness to use another for one's own ends. Divorce in Jesus' time left the woman to fend for herself. She would have no means of support. Jesus says merely giving a certificate of divorce is too light a thing. It leads to adultery, the willfulness of using another. Finally, Jesus declared it is not a matter of swearing an oath falsely. That again is too light a thing. Instead, let all your words be spoken with honest simplicity.

Jesus is speaking in hyperbole, full of a preacher's energy and exaggeration. If your right eye or right hand cause you to sin, tear it out or cut it off. He is not advocating a one-eyed, left-handed generation. But he is making stark the choice before us. St. Benedict puts Jesus' teaching in a bit more acceptable terms. He says, "as soon as wrongful thoughts come into your heart dash them against Christ." Choose continually the way of love. And let all thoughts be measured against its law.

Then Jesus shifts the focus to our neighbor. And interestingly we know from the story of the Good Samaritan that our neighbor is the one who will show mercy. If your neighbor is troubled by something you have done (if we have been divisive), then go and reconcile with your neighbor. I am told that Mennonites will simply say "Matthew 5: 24" to indicate to another that they must reconcile themselves to one whom they have offended.

Both of these methods are ways to get back on track – to keep ourselves in the way of Truth, and (when our neighbor is offended) to reconcile. We can begin this good life anew every day, even every hour. We can infer from Jesus' words what this way of life looks like even though none of us ever completely gets there. The way of Truth is a world free from division and absolutism. It leans toward wellbeing. The way of the Lord is one where we watch our words. We try to filter out what might diminish another. And rather than use another for our own ends, we seek a way of love that frees them to be their best, truest selves. If we seek life's meaning or what is true, we have to be ready to admit that we haven't gotten there yet. But the choice is always before us to begin anew the good life. Our continual confession, which is our ongoing desire, is to delight in God's will and to walk in God's ways. *Amen.*