

**ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως**  
**The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany; 16 February 2020**  
**St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster**  
*Time-stamp: <2020-02-15 Sat 13:49>*

**O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.**

*Sirach 15:15-20, Psalm 119:1-8, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 5:21-37*

## **1 Be perfect...**

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” That clears it up, doesn’t it? All you have to do, in order to follow Jesus, is to be perfect like God!

It’s no wonder that the Sermon on the Mount has at times been described as a message by which Jesus intends to render the law so extreme, so hard to keep, that people will recognize it as impossible, fall on our knees in despair, and become available to the freely given grace of God. That’s not a bad angle to take on the Sermon on the Mount but I don’t think it really gives Jesus’ message its due.

We’re in Year A of our three year lectionary cycle: we’ll be reading from Matthew this year. But, tragically, the Church Year has conspired to prevent us hearing my favorite part of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount. We celebrated the Feast of the Presentation instead of hearing the Beatitudes. Next week is the last week of Epiphany, with its own readings. So last week and this are all we get!

The Sermon on the Mount is incredibly challenging – but it is also incredibly encouraging. It is, for me, the place where Jesus most clearly sets forth his vision of what the Kingdom of God looks like. And if anyone should be an authority on that topic, it would be Jesus, God in the flesh, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

## **2 Torah and Prophets**

Last week we started in on Jesus’ teaching, where he proclaimed that he was not diminishing the Torah and the Prophets, but fulfilling them. Last week we heard the prophet Isaiah, with his ringing condemnation of religion without a social conscience, and his declaration that the kind of religious practice God desires is the kind that brings relief to the poor, the oppressed, those in any kind of trouble or need. Isaiah told us it is those people who practice a religion of justice who will see God, who will know their prayers to be heard by God, who will recognize God’s gracious response to them.

This week, by comparison, we might observe that Jesus is talking about the Torah. He starts with a challenge that was as shocking then as it is shocking now: if your righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, the priests and the preachers, the pundits who purport to represent Christianity on the news, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Never.

Jesus goes on to shock his listeners further. Whereas the Torah provided guidance on how to live a life that would be pleasing to God, it was often used instead as a description of what we could get away with while avoiding the judgment of God. How far over the speed limit can I go without getting ticketed? Exactly how clean does my apartment need to be in order to avoid forfeiting my deposit? How long can I keep those library books before I begin to accrue fines?

Read from the point of view of, “how much can I get away with?” Jesus seems to ramp up the anxiety. Murder may land you in court, but anger and insults will land you in the fire of hell. Whoa. Adultery may subject you to legal prosecution, but looking at a woman lustfully, again, is grounds for condemnation to hell. Laws about divorce, oaths, retaliation, and attitudes toward one’s enemy are likewise raised to a new level of stringency. Baby Jesus, meek and mild, is starting to sound pretty demanding, here!

### 3 Divorce

I want to take a brief side trip, but it’s going to take us where we’re going. Let’s pull out divorce as an example. Now I’m pretty sure that there is no one sitting in this room over the age of, say, 14, who hasn’t been guilty of anger, hurling insults, looking with lust, lying, retaliating, refusing to comply with a request, or hating an enemy. But there are, perhaps, some, who have not been through the legal process of divorce. Those of you who *have* been divorced are likely to feel the sting of those words of Jesus more than the others, even though they’re all in there together, none weighted any more heavily than the others! It’s funny how that works.

But let us consider to whom Jesus is speaking. Even today, there are cultures in which a man may divorce his wife in a matter of minutes. By saying the word. A bond which God intended and hoped would be lifelong can be dissolved. And is always seems to be the man’s prerogative, never the woman’s. And in those particular cultures, women are vastly more likely to be totally dependent upon their husbands for food, clothing, shelter, and even the right to be heard in a court of law. They often depend on their husbands for *everything*. So when a couple today decides their marriage is no longer tenable, for whatever, reason, and makes a heart-wrenching decision to disrupt their own lives with a divorce, there’s something qualitatively different going on there than a man who unilaterally decides to renounce his wife, condemning her to a life of poverty and perhaps prostitution, so he can chase after someone new. Divorce is not a pleasant thing today: but the inequities of a society even more patriarchal than our own made divorce ever so much more cruel and evil in Jesus’ context.

And at the same time, he doesn’t seem to distinguish between the relative evils of anger, insults, lust, divorce, lying, retaliation, denying a request for charity, and hatred or enemies.

Instead, with all these things, Jesus is asking a question. Like John Lenon after him, Jesus is inviting his listeners to imagine a different kind of world. Imagine if, not only were you never in danger of being hurt or killed, imagine if no one ever acted out of anger toward you, insulted you or called you names. Imagine, sisters, if no man ever made demeaning comments about your body or gave you looks that made you feel violated. Imagine if no spouse ever cheated or abandoned their family for selfish reasons. Imagine if you could simply take what people said at face value, without always having to weigh motives and trustworthiness. What if no one ever took advantage of your willingness to believe them? The whole advertising business would collapse!

Imagine if vengeance to slights, real or imagined, was no longer the order of the day. Imagine if, when you lacked for something, others instantly stepped up to lend a hand, so that no one was ever in need. Imagine if even those who stood against you, disagreed with you, were in competition with you, still treated you with respect and compassion even in the midst of your disagreement.

What a crazy vision of a world! That, says Jesus, is what God’s Kingdom is like. That’s what it looks like to live in the Kingdom of Heaven. And Jesus is inviting his listeners to participate in the work of God, which is to bring exactly such a world into being. “An eye for an eye” is not going to get us there.

## 4 God shaped heart

Instead, Jesus is inviting his listeners, and that includes you and I, not just to obey the law as a limit to our freedom, a description of what we can get away with. But to embrace the law and the prophets as a description of the heart of God in the times they were written down, and to allow our own hearts to be shaped by them so that we can live from God shaped-hearts that correspond to our own times and circumstances.

Jesus invites us to be perfect, not like a driving record without blemishes, but perfect like zen: being present, in the moment, at peace. Jesus invites us to be perfect not like a presidential candidate on the stump, hiding their flaws and projecting unwarranted confidence and knowledge. Instead Jesus invites us to be perfect like a child, beloved of their parents, who may have messed up a line or two in the school play, but still stood out there and poured their heart into it.

Jesus invites us to be perfect, not like a religious zealot who is striving for something he is not, but perfect like God, who is present in your life, loving you, and inviting you to partner with God today in bringing God's kingdom into reality.

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