

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time  
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*But I say...*

For the last several weeks we have been – with the crowd on the gently sloping Mount of the Beatitudes – listening to, what in Matthew’s Gospel, Fr. Fred refers to as Jesus’ Inaugural Address. Jesus begins with a call for us to turn away from our old / current ways, because with his coming into the world, *God’s Kingdom*... a bless-ed world, a “beatitudinal world” is at hand — a world in which mercy, trust, compassion, integrity, inclusion, peace-making reign.

Jesus, also makes clear the rationale for his mission among us: and ***that is because we*** – God’s ordinary, everyday people – are the essential agents (the salt and the light) in creating this new world – in making the Kingdom *real*... by the way we live in relationship with God, one another and all God’s creation!

In today’s portion of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus moves us further in understanding how that can happen despite what we may have been taught or have experienced or been led to believe to the contrary ...

In these teachings, Jesus calls disciples – both then and now – to a new understanding, a new consciousness – *a new way of being human* and, helps us to begin to see and experience God’s kingdom already come on earth!

Jesus actually gives us a formula for participating in God’s bless-ed world. Repeated again and again are the words “you have heard it said ... , ***but I say to you*** ... ” With these words Jesus shares **not a new list of rules, but illuminates the intentions of the existing law, and clearly demonstrates that his mission is not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them.** I think, it’s important that we understand that the Mosaic Law, to which Jesus as a good Jew, was devoted, was – in its origins – historically among the most significant advances in establishing a foundation for the stability and sustainability of human society.

**Yet – like all human constructions – the Law and the society rooted in it – over time fell victim to losing touch with its original intentionality ... lost its *preservative* and *enlivening* ‘saltiness’ and its *illuminating* power!**

So, in today’s Gospel, Jesus tells the crowd: "**unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven**" which must have been quite a statement at the time! How could anyone’s righteousness exceed that of those who studied the law and interpreted it for the people? It is hard to imagine that those listening on that hillside — ordinary fisherman, shepherds, farmers, and their kin — would have taken much comfort in such high standards!

**And, in fact, Jesus’s interpretation of the existing law, is not less, but even more demanding....** These teachings suggest that what a person does is only part of the problem. The kingdom of God demands radical discipleship such that our *very ways of thinking ... of being human ... are transformed*. **Jesus is calling us to awareness of the thought processes that give rise to and legitimate these behaviors – in ourselves and in our cultures and societies.**

In the first part of these teachings, which we heard today: Jesus talks about murder, adultery, and oaths. Although these may seem to be unrelated to one another, in reality they give a foundational vision of what God’s kingdom looks like.

Jesus begins with the most serious example: the ending of another human’s life by murder. In each example that Jesus provides, he first notes the *minimal requirement of the law*, then *asserts an ethic that exceeds that most basic obligation*. Again, in no way, does Jesus dismiss the law, but in each case, **moves beyond legalism** to an ethic informed by the values of *integrity, trust, and compassion within community*.

So, Jesus teaches, that it is *insufficient* to *merely* avoid murdering someone — anger and insult can themselves be equivalent forms of violence. As we all know, hostility that escalates in verbal abuse or passive aggressive behavior can be just as damaging as murder. Jesus is, of course, not speaking about justifiable anger at an unjust situation, and it would be consistent with his teaching to note – especially during Black History Month – that the very existence of hierarchical systems of power and privilege can be murderous – whether intended or not.

After dealing with murder, Jesus moves to adultery. In placing it here, Jesus gives voice to the high value and preciousness of intimate, interpersonal relationships in God’s Kingdom and the evil posed by any ways of thinking that denigrate or violate them. To *some extent* the existing law already recognized this thinking ...For instance: The Mosaic Law explicitly forbids coveting a neighbor’s wife, ... however, she is listed *as a ‘possession’* among the rest of the neighbor’s ‘possessions’...

**Far from seeing women as property to be ‘possessed’ and coveted by men, Jesus’ teaching on adultery and divorce reinforces the dignity of women as full persons in the Kingdom of God and warns against a culture of patriarchal privilege in which divorce could be exercised somewhat capriciously – with devastating consequences for women (and children). Again, as with righteous anger, Jesus recognizes situations in which divorce is itself a righteous action; in God’s Kingdom, for any human – to be used and discarded for another’s desires or whim, violates the ethic of integrity, trust, and compassion.**

Then, Jesus teaches about the making of vows. At first, this might seem like an odd example.... However, when set within an ancient context where most dealings *occurred verbally* rather than in writing, one's word would have carried something like the weight of one's signature on a legal contract today. Rather, than resorting to "strengthening" one's word by attaching to it something of alleged *greater importance* (for example, swearing "by heaven"), Jesus suggests that one's spoken word *be so authentic and so in line with one's intentions and known behavior, that it is already above question*. In other words, Jesus is calling for his disciples to demonstrate the highest possible level of trustworthiness and integrity, not only in their dealings with other persons, but also in their dealings with God.

Regardless of the vast historical and cultural divides that separate us today from Jesus' world, these teaching and the underlying ethic are timeless and are as foundational to community in our twenty-first century as in the first. *The instruction to live as the Bless-ed – Beatitudinal – people we have been created to be, remains the core of our discipleship.*

The Kingdom of God centers around *love* – not power; and *trust* that does not rely on oaths but on the deep commitments God's children make to one another to recognize, honor and respect the inherent dignity of each and all of us.

So, in the end, to what is Jesus calling us? *Not* to a checklist of morality but to a flourishing of life. *Not* to a baseline of decency but to an embodied, relational, transformative encounter with all whom we meet. *Not* to a sufficient set of hurdles for righteousness but to a path of *wholeness* with all creatures and Creator alike.

In this beautiful Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins to turn the perspective of the disciples outside of themselves. We are not disciples for own sakes, *but for the sake of those around us, ... for the sake of the Kingdom.*

Nothing we do as disciples, as believers, *is an independent action*. Everything has an effect on those around us and, as we increasingly know: on all of Creation. And when we remember this, our actions are shaped by that *solidarity* and *accountability*.

At the same time—and here is some of the real *Good News* of this text—to be disciples *means we are not alone!* The crowd in Jesus' time, living under imperial oppression needed to know that – as do disciples today, living in a culture that celebrates individualism. How we work out what it means to be disciples of Jesus is *not a solitary affair*, but can *only* happen within a community of the faithful – **because there is no way that *what we are called to do*, can reach its full potential without the entire community of the faithful with, beside and for one another.**

**Amen!**