

February 12, 2023
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

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

In today's Gospel reading, and for the third and last week in a row, we heard from the Sermon on the Mount. Remember, we're still at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, and Jesus has really just gotten started. These three weeks give us only about the first third of the Sermon on the Mount; next week we'll be on to something else. Two weeks ago we heard the beatitudes.¹ Last week we heard, first, "You are the light of the world" and "the salt of the earth" and then, setting the stage for today: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."²

In case anyone is wondering that that means, Jesus gets into some nitty-gritty; we heard part of that nitty-gritty today. Using three real-life examples from the Jewish law, Jesus says, in essence, *yes, and: yes, you have to do that, and you have to do even more than that.* To describe what Jesus is doing here, one author uses the terms *reaffirmation* and *radicalization*.³ Jesus both reaffirms Jewish law and radicalizes it; he thereby raises the standard of behavior for life in Jewish community.

We are far from that time and place and culture, and yet Jesus' words ring with the relevance of universal truth. Yes, we need laws that cover the essentials necessary to keep our society generally ordered and safe. At the same time, there can never be rules enough to cover every particular detail of every particular situation. Life in community is not a football game. In so very many ways, we have to be able to depend on each other to do the right thing.

During Bible study on Thursday night, we discussed this passage. The example that popped into my mind was the opioid crisis and the Sackler family. They'd been on my mind because I had seen yet another news story about the ongoing efforts to remove the Sackler name from exhibits at prominent art museums. To relate the opioid epidemic to today's gospel, consider that no member of the Sackler family or the Sackler organization has been prosecuted for murder as defined by the criminal law. On the other hand, there is clear evidence that their actions caused literal death. No one committed that legal crime, but what they did was clearly wrong. Jesus might say they got off on a technicality, and that, when it comes to the kingdom of God, those technical loopholes are now closed. No amount of money donated to art museums can make up for all the other things that happened.

Admittedly, the Sacklers are an extreme example. I chose them to illustrate the point, but I want to be careful. I can't imagine that any of us has done anything like what they did. But we can't let our obvious distance from them distance us from the point that Jesus is making here. The point is this: we may be law-abiding citizens, technically guilty of no more than the occasional breaking of the speed limit while driving our cars, but that's just not enough.

I think we know that. I think we learned it in kindergarten. But it surely is difficult and complicated. It might even be in some ways more complicated for us than it was for those first hearers of Jesus' words. Here's one reason why: the world has become so very small. Most of us are relatively privileged Americans, and that means that we are relatively massive consumers. The consumer choices we make have cumulatively the literal impact of life or death for people who live across the globe from us.

I think today's gospel is perhaps really just another example of Jesus telling us to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. If that's so, then he might even be saying that loving our neighbors is loving God. These days our neighbors can live in the house next door or on another continent. The truth is, sometimes it feels like we know too much and we see too much. Our smart phones deliver the world into our hands. On some days, the magnitude of suffering feels paralyzing. I suspect that the answer to our paralysis is what it always is: pick a neighbor, near or far, human or creaturely, and just do *something*. Actually, maybe it's better to do that something after setting the conscious intent that you are participating in Jesus' radicalization of the law, by expressing love in community—without being demanded to and without expecting something in return.

Lately I've been struggling with so much of Christianity. That's because its loudest voices continue to be like those of members of Congress who shout "Liar" at the President during the State of the Union Address. They might not be breaking any civil law, but neither are they behaving as Jesus instructed. It's hard to understand how they could be reading the same gospel that we do.

Speaking of reading the gospel, there was a time when the ordinary Christians didn't and couldn't. In the western church for centuries, the Bible was in Latin only, precisely to keep ordinary Christians from reading it. One goal of the Protestant Reformation was to translate the Bible into languages that ordinary people could read and understand. Some people were executed for doing those translations.

This week I was reminded of the conflict that birthed the Church of England and with it the Anglicanism that is our tradition as Episcopalians. A lot of blood was shed as the country swung from Catholic to Protestant to Catholic to Protestant. Today is the anniversary of the death of Lady Jane Gray. Jane was executed in 1554 at age 17. She was the Protestant Queen of England for all of nine days, between the Protestant Edward VI and the Catholic Mary Tudor. That history is way too complicated to detail here; I encourage you to look it up if you've forgotten it or if you never knew it. When we think of the Reformation in England we think of Henry VIII. And it's true that in England politics played a role in the Reformation. But religion did, too, for sure. People died for what they believed.

I suppose there has always been conflict in the church. That's why Paul wrote all those letters. All we can do is follow the Jesus we know, the one who calls us both to reaffirm and to radicalize. With that as our intention, God knows what might happen.

Notes

¹ Matt 5:1-2, NRSV.

² Matt 5:13-17, NRSV.

³ M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VIII, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 189.