

February 16, 2020
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
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Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalm 119:1-8
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

When I hear that Gospel reading, I can't help but think of Jimmy Carter. At least a few of us here are old enough to remember the 1976 presidential election pitting challenger Jimmy Carter against incumbent Gerald Ford. I was 14 years old. It was the first presidential election that truly entered my mental universe. When I think back on it, only one detail comes to mind: Carter saying to *Playboy* magazine, "I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times."¹ At the time it caused quite a hubbub, so much so that several years ago *Time* magazine included that comment as number 5 on its list of "Top 10 Unfortunate Political One-Liners."² For comparison, number 1 is Richard Nixon saying, "I am not a crook."

Carter's comment stirred up people for a variety of reasons. For some, it was simply too much information, which is hard to imagine now. Others felt he shouldn't have agreed to an interview with *Playboy*. But his doing so was a calculated decision. At that time, if not now, Carter was an oddity on the presidential campaign trail: a born-again evangelical Christian, a devout man who was fluent in the faith and taught Sunday school in his Southern Baptist church. One reason he agreed to a *Playboy* interview is that he was trying to fight the public image of him as suspiciously sanctimonious. My, how things have changed.

That incident did not affect my opinion of Jimmy Carter, but clearly it resonated with me. I was growing up in a mostly-non-practicing never-Bible-reading Roman Catholic household. But I had been catechized on catalogs of sin and was surrounded by Southern Baptists. And still it was the first time I had a deep inkling that thoughts can be as important as actions.

With his comment, Carter was of course referencing one bite of the Gospel reading we heard today. Last Sunday and this Sunday gave us two slices of the large pie that is Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. To set the stage, Jesus is being followed by "great crowds," so he goes up a mountain to escape them. The disciples follow, and Jesus gives them a long-winded lesson about what following really means.

In last week's portion Jesus said these things: "*You* are the salt of the earth."³ "*You* are the light of the world."⁴ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to *abolish* but to *fulfill*."⁵ "... unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."⁶ (Emphasis mine.)

In today's slice Jesus punches down into some particulars. In doing so he sets a standard of interpersonal relationship that is demandingly higher than what had come before. The prior rules prohibited certain egregious behaviors; the new ones close even *mental* wiggle room.

I typed the term *wiggle room* into this sermon and then decided to look it up, to verify that my understanding of it fit this context. It's defined as *leeway* or *latitude*, as in a contract that allows room for further negotiation.⁷ So, yeah, it seems an especially fitting term here. It points to two somewhat contradictory inclinations that humans seem to have when it comes to interpersonal relationships: one, we tend to prefer having some leeway in just about everything we do; and two, we tend to view interpersonal exchanges as contracts that spell out tit for tat. In practice, we want to guarantee flexibility for *ourselves*, but we want to be able to hold the *other person* accountable. Jesus here not only eliminates the wiggle room, he goes as far as to put a final kibosh on the idea of a contracted faith. Our relationship with God isn't a contract—it's a covenant. And in a covenantal relationship, wiggle room is beside the point.

In this year's presidential race, the candidate from either party who comes closest to being a sanctimonious Christian is, oddly enough, a gay man. That's true unless we give credence to the virulently anti-gay American Family Association, one of whose writers last month called Pete Buttigieg a "fake Christian."⁸ Another AFA writer this week warned of the threat to society of the "married" Buttigieg (the writer's quotation marks, not mine).⁹ By AFA standards, I too am a "fake Christian," and that's fine with me. The truth is that the entire Episcopal Church has learned a lot about marriage because of its work in response to those who were so long pleading for it. And what it learned about marriage applies to so much more.

The Episcopal Church authorized the blessing of same-sex unions at its General Convention in 2012. It wasn't that long ago. It was a pretty big deal, and not without controversy. I was there, and after the vote, those attending from the Diocese of South Carolina left the convention hall and never returned. Instead they went home, and soon that diocese became the last of several to leave the Episcopal Church over LBGT+ issues.

I was there because I was a staffer for the project team that developed the rites and other resources the General Convention authorized at that time. The theology sub-team realized as it worked that the church didn't have a consensus contemporary understanding even of *different-sex* marriage. A theology of same-sex marriage depends on a theology of marriage, period. And a theology of marriage depends on a theology of divine and interpersonal relationship, period. The team couldn't do it all, but they wrote a lovely theological essay that was included and approved with the same-sex blessings materials. It frames same-sex marriage in particular and marriage in general within a broader understanding of covenantal relationships. I want to read one part of that essay:

Reflecting theologically on same-sex relationships can become an occasion for the Church to reflect more broadly on the significance of covenantal commitment in the life of faith. Both Scripture and our theological traditions invite us to consider, first, the sacramental character of covenantal relationships; by this we mean the potential of such relationships to become outward and visible signs of God's grace. And second, covenantal relationships can both reflect and inspire the eschatological vision of Christian life. The covenantal commitments we make with each other, in other words, can evoke our desire for union with God, which is our final hope in Christ.

Our understanding of covenant thus derives first and foremost from the gracious covenant God makes with us in Christ. The many types of relational commitments we make carry the potential to reflect and bear witness to that divine covenant. Here we have especially in mind the covenants made by intimate couples in the sacred vows they make to enter into a public, lifelong relationship of faithful monogamy.

Scripture and Christian tradition encourage us to see in these intimate relationships a reflection of God's own desire for us.¹⁰

It continues:

Covenantal commitments are thus shaped by and can also reflect the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, which the Church celebrates in baptism and eucharist. Intimate couples who live in a sacred covenant find themselves swept up into a grand and risky endeavor: to see if they can find their life in God by giving it to another. This dynamic reflects the baptismal life all of us share as Christians. As we live out our baptismal vows throughout our lives, we are called to follow this pattern of God's self-giving desire and love.

In the eucharist, we recall Christ's willingness to give his life for the world: "This is my body, given for you." When two people give their lives, their bodies, to one another in a lifelong covenant, they can discover and show how in giving ourselves we find ourselves (Matthew 16:25). When the Church pronounces God's blessing on the vows of lifelong fidelity—for different-sex and same-sex couples alike—the Church makes a bold claim: the paschal mystery is the very root and source of life in the couple's relationship.

This sacramental framework in which to reflect on same-sex relationships has, in turn, led us to consider more carefully several other key theological themes: the vocational aspect of covenantal relationship; how such a vocation is lived in Christian households; the fruitfulness of covenantal relationships in lives of service, generosity, and hospitality; and mutual blessing, as God's blessing in covenantal relationship becomes a blessing to the wider community.¹¹

In the Sermon on the Mount, maybe that's what Jesus is getting at regarding the behavior of his disciples and their operation in the world. It seems pretty clear to me: the way we pattern the most intimate aspects of our lives has implications for the welfare of the world.

Back in December, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi was asked by a reporter, "Do you hate the president?" Her response was, "I don't hate anybody. I was raised in a Catholic house. We don't hate anybody, not anybody in the world."¹² Maybe I'm just a dupe, but I believe her. If it's true, she may be a better Christian than I am. There are times when I feel a tiny kernel of hate trying to take root in my heart. It happened just last week, when I read that mining and drilling have been given the go-ahead on land formerly removed from Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument. This had already happened on land formerly removed from Bears Ears National Monument.¹³

Hate is sometimes tempting, but ultimately hate won't help. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., famously said this: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." We are the light of the world. We can't let our hearts be infected with hate; we should try to enable our hearts to be infected with love. That is our covenant, with God and with one another.

Notes

¹ Lee Dembart, "Carter's Comments on Sex Cause Concern," *The New York Times*, September 23, 1976, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/09/23/archives/carters-comments-on-sex-cause-concern.html> (accessed February 16, 2020).

² "Top 10 Unfortunate Political One-Liners," *Time*, available online at http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1859513_1859526_1859514,00.html (accessed February 16, 2020).

³ Matthew 5:13a NRSV.

⁴ Matthew 5:14a NRSV.

⁵ Matthew 5:17 NRSV.

⁶ Matthew 5:20 NRSV.

⁷ "wiggle room," Merriam-Webster online, available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wiggle%20room> (accessed February 16, 2020).

⁸ Bryan Fischer, "Pete Buttigieg, Fake Christian," American Family Association online, January 3, 2020, available at <https://www.afa.net/the-stand/culture/2020/01/pete-buttigieg-fake-christian/> (accessed February 16, 2020).

⁹ Michael Brown, "I Will Say What the Political Leaders Cannot Say About Pete Buttigieg," American Family Association online, February 11, 2020, available at <https://www.afa.net/the-stand/culture/2020/02/i-will-say-what-the-political-leaders-cannot-say-about-pete-buttigieg/> (accessed February 16, 2020).

¹⁰ *Liturgical Resources 1: I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing*, revised and expanded edition, (New York: Church Publishing, 2015), 24. The near-final text of this resource, which is almost identical to the final, is contained in *Report to the 77th General Convention, Otherwise Known as the Blue Book*, July 2012, available online at <https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/5023.pdf> (accessed February 16, 2020). The portion quoted here may be found on pages 193-194.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

¹² For the video, see "'I Don't Hate Anyone,' Pelosi Tells Reporter After Trump Question," *The New York Times*, December 5, 2019, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000006860361/pelosi-trump-impeachment.html?action=click>ype=vhs&version=vhs-heading&module=vhs®ion=title-area&cvview=true&t=14> (accessed February 16, 2020).

¹³ See Coral Davenport, "Trump Opens National Monument Land to Energy Exploration," *The New York Times*, February 6, 2020, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/06/climate/trump-grand-staircase-monument.html> (accessed February 16, 2020).