

## **Sermon for Epiphany 6 A (February 13, 2011)**

*Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37 (esp. 21-26)*

*Pr. Shane Cota*

In today's Gospel, Jesus continues His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. With all of that heavy-duty law, Jesus must've looked like another Moses. Unlike Moses, the faulty mouthpiece of God, Jesus speaks with authority. Jesus is commenting on the meaning of the Law. He may seem like another law-giving Moses until you remember that Jesus Himself is the meaning of the Law. The consequences of breaking the Law fall squarely on His divine shoulders. As squarely as the cross beam drops down on Him when He walks the dusty path to Golgotha's mount. The government shall be upon His shoulders, both by Herod and by Pilate. Jesus knows how adulterous, crooked, unforgiving, judgmental and cruel His own people Israel can be. Every faithful Jew listened intently to the Law regularly in the synagogue worship every Saturday. The hope of freedom in Christ, the Messiah, is at the heart of the Law. By the time Jesus arrives on the mount to preach, the Law does not find the Jews behaving properly.

Jesus teaches something that seems new, but really had been hidden for centuries. Jesus' interpretation points a direct light on the heart of every man, woman and child. Jesus' interests lie with the heart. Rabbis interpreted Law breakers by the outward act. The woman caught in adultery sat waiting for the stones to hit her because she got caught. Jesus points to the heart. Listen to His explanation of "*You shall not murder.*" Yes, certainly murder is wrong, as in Cain's murder of Abel. But murdering someone by controlling them, beating them slowly over time with words or fists, ruining their good name, or merely thinking about hurting another is all wrong and is seen by God as cold-blooded killing! That's new for Jesus' listeners.

Jesus says that being angry with someone is murdering him in your heart, holding grudges is murder in your heart, refusing to be reconciled, to forgive others is murder in your heart. Sure, it's easy to accuse others who cheated, or lied, or acted wrongly, or held a grudge. Accusing people is easy, but what about turning that finger-pointing on yourself? Even Satan accuses, that's what "devil" means – "accuser" – think about that the next time you hold grudges and want to dredge up someone's past sins that were long ago forgiven by Christ – you're standing in the place of Satan when you bring up that stuff in the church. Those who harbor anger, grudges and unforgiveness will be liable to judgment, Jesus says. Liable to eternal death. You don't want to forgive, you don't get forgiven either – you get put in prison, in hell.

Now, Jesus knows Israel is wayward. He knows the Gentiles are ignorant in darkness. He knows none of us can ever hope to live up to even the smallest portion of the Law. Jesus' interpretation of the Law is even narrower. We can't escape any liability. Anger that's not quickly controlled will become hatred combined with contempt. Anger easily becomes bitterness, hatred, and indifference. From this comes revenge, hostility and murder. Whether by outward act or scheming thought, it's all the same and it hurts just as deeply. Even if you do manage to destroy your enemy by ruining his name and reputation and livelihood or even by his physical death, you have also destroyed yourself. There is an old Chinese proverb that says, "He who seeks revenge should remember to dig two graves." One not only for his enemy, but also for himself. Revenge and bitterness toward people is not the Christian way, especially between fellow believers. It is the way of evil, death and hell.

Reconcile to God in Christ. You can only take the Law seriously when you seriously receive Christ, who has come and completed the Law's demands. Love God by loving yourself, loving your spouse, your children, your fellow Christians, your employers, your co-workers, your friends, neighbors, even strangers and enemies. Loving them by doing all you can to help them when they have need. Sacrificing your own self for the sake of others. This you DO because of Jesus' sacrifice. *"God has done what the law, weakened by our human flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, [God] condemned sin in the flesh. Now the righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit"* (Rom. 8:3-4).

We are in Christ, with sinful desires and evil, self-centered wills demolished. Jesus resides in our hearts. We are Baptized into His Body. Sin and death atoned for. Sins that hang around are cast away. We can offer our treasures in faith as the Wise men knelt before the Lord in honor. But, you want to worship. You want to honor God. Yet, you've incurred an outstanding debt. An argument, an evil thought, a grudge, something you harbor against another. It's unresolved. Well, worship no further. *"So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."* Most of us learned that this passage dealt with Communion. That if you have a disagreement with anyone, especially another Christian, don't commune until it's resolved. That's true. Confession, Absolution and reconciliation come before the Lord's Supper. But Jesus says don't even offer a gift. Don't worship. Don't sing the hymns, the Liturgy, pray any prayers, until you've reconciled. Jews gave offerings in the Temple. Blessings from God dedicated back to God. Like financial offerings today. Don't even give those. How can you give when you harbor anger? How can you sing of peace when there's a war raging on in your life?

First be reconciled to your brother – forgive his debt. Literally hurl it away in to the air – let it go – that's what the word "forgive" means. (ἀφίημι). Release your brother from his prison (forgive his debt). To forgive you, Jesus got thrown at the jaws of Hell on the cross. Bound, drawn out, hanging, dying, shedding Blood as payment for you. The Blood of the Lamb is God's remittance, the wage of our sin. Talk about throwing good money after bad. God dumped out His entire treasure chest onto earth as a baby infant in Bethlehem. Knowing full well His own dear people would squander it, waste it, bury it deep for themselves and leave the Gentiles in the dark. Even kill the Lord of glory. But Christ crucified is the highest offering. The perfect Lamb. The sweetest smell. Jesus' Blood and water from the cross quenches the flames of lustful sin. The raging hell inside of us is quenched by soaking us in Baptismal water and Word. Easter's open grave completes it!

Jesus' audience on the mount understand this concept of forgiving as God's way of releasing mankind from sin. Now, Jesus says everyone can forgive this way. Living in Christ, you DO forgive as God forgives. *"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."* You can and you do. Christ is in you. This isn't a new Law. The Law is complete in Jesus' sacrifice. His Blood covers you. His Word and Spirit animate you. He makes it so. And your Father receives you as a rescued child! Your old way of life is left behind! This is where the old saying comes from: "Be the 'better' person; if you want to have the last word in a grudge match, say 'I'm sorry'". (διαλλάσσω) Because your identity is sewn up in Jesus, you appear different.

Jesus in you distinguishes you from false Christians and non-Christians. You are brought together with your brother. The grudge and strife may disappear slowly or fast. You may be close again or work years to build a relationship back up. This quickly became the ancient Church's model of Christian living. Taking sacrificial and brotherly love to heart, serving each other and the community.

The sun should never set on anyone's anger. Don't hold grudges and withhold forgiveness for years, months, days, or even hours. Holding in old stuff to use against people later is the devil's job; remember that he is the Accuser. Reconcile quickly and often. Change the mind of your opponent and win him over. This is speaking the truth in love and putting love into action. Keeping sins and grudges and hurts secret, un-confessed, un-resolved, can lead a Christian on the road to hell. Repentance – a simple apology and reconciliation can change lives when worked out in Christ. As a witness to fellow Christians – as a strong witness to the outside world.

None of the Laws Jesus interprets and the sins He mentions in today's Gospel are un-forgivable. We need not live in fear, worried about judgment, for Christ has already been judged on our behalf. Rather, live under grace in hope. Jesus is the only One truly convicted of the crimes. The One sentenced with our hellish death decree. Because He is Son of God. The Lord is merciful. He forgives the active felon and the silent killer. He forgives the manslaughter criminal and the vengeful hypocrite, who with a smile on his face drives the knife in someone's back. He forgives the outward adulterer and the lonely pornography addict. He heals abusers, He shows the Way of life to enablers and insecure people. All sinners look the same. All redeemed sinners look as Christ to the Father's eyes. The church that reflects this is all she says and does will have an impact – the strife torn church of grudge holders and accusers is immature and just looks like the world, as St. Paul reminds us in today's epistle. It is the way of death and evil that Moses talks about in today's Old Testament. It destroys churches and Christians.

Before you think about cutting off arms or plucking out eyes, pray, "*lead us not into temptation.*" Take to heart the forgiveness pronounced to you in Church. Eat and drink Christ all the time in Holy Communion. You can't rely on your own strength. You can't live the Law by human energy. The Sermon on the Mount isn't a new Law. Rather, it is the fulfillment of the Law in Jesus' loving sacrifice. Christ has been made liable, tied to our sin and death by nails in a cross. His open tomb magnifies the Blood bought gift with new life and everlasting bonds between God and His people. We approach the Lord's throne in faith, having our worship and offerings cleansed. As we depart into the world and serve, we confidently speak the truth in love. Saying no to sin and yes to God, yes to Christ, yes to your neighbor - in your vocation, in your faith. This is on-going. You enter into Jesus' Feast in the Church. Only to one day enter into the great Feast of Love, with Christ the fattened calf, the Heavenly Holy Communion, the Marriage Banquet with the robe of Jesus on your body, marking you as redeemed by Christ the crucified. Whatever any murderous, grudge holding, satanic accuser may say (even if it only be your own conscience), your sins are forgiven by Christ, who truly loves you and gave Himself for you. Amen.