

The Rev. Ryan Fischer  
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
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Lectionary Year A: Matthew 5:21-37

When we ask ourselves, "How does Jesus come across in today's Gospel text?", we're likely to come to conclusions like "judgmental" or, perhaps, "vindictive." The kind and gentle Jesus to whom we may be more accustomed does not appear here. If the purpose of the Gospels is to get the good news out so people become interested in Jesus, then Matthew's inclusion of these sayings seems a bit counterproductive. "Come follow Jesus...he can be a real grump sometimes, but, chances are, you deserved it!"

One possible explanation for all the harshness is that Jesus doesn't want to give the impression that he's letting folks off easy. These verses do, indeed, follow the Beatitudes, which are some of the most comforting and reassuring words in all of Scripture -- "Blessed are the poor in spirit," and "Blessed are those who mourn," and "Blessed are the meek," and so on. In a 180-degree turn, Jesus now challenges his hearers in today's text with what amounts to be brow-beating, right down to advising self-mutilation as a treatment for sin.

We can safely conclude that Jesus has set the bar awfully high here. But lest anyone consider oneself less of a sinner than one's neighbor, Jesus points to the fact that there are more sinners in the world than one would think -- right down to men who cast lustful eyes at women and, most controversially, people who are divorced. Remember Paul's words: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

That verse would certainly apply here!

Still, though, this text leaves us with more questions than answers, particularly on the matter of divorce. Should a person in a bad marriage live a life of misery in order to be a faithful follower of Jesus? And what is inherently adulterous about marrying a divorced woman? Certainly Jesus -- who, after all, kept company with tax collectors and sinners -- should be a little softer on divorce, shouldn't he?

But thinking back to Jesus' time, we can find that husbands regarded their wives as property, and understood in that light, we can conclude that Jesus wants husbands not to think of their wives as disposable. He points to the value of our relationships beyond their material worth. Knowing that, it would be difficult to maintain that Jesus would also advise a person in, for example, an abusive relationship to remain in it.

Speaking more broadly, it's still difficult to wrap our minds around Jesus' insistence on perfect (or near-perfect) righteousness as a prerequisite for salvation. He says also in Matthew's Gospel, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). We see Jesus setting forth thereafter a partial review of the Ten Commandments, and then concluding that we had better measure up to these very high standards lest we be damned to hell. Yet we would never tell someone that he or she should outpace the Pope in terms of personal righteousness because that's what Jesus demands. This would be completely contrary to our theology of grace and forgiveness; we want people to confess their sins, for sure, but we don't expect them to be perfect.

Nor should we.

We teach -- properly, I might add -- that we are not saved by our own righteous-

ness and our own good works. But where does this put today's sayings of Jesus? If we are saved by God's grace and not our good works, and if righteousness is God's righteousness with which he clothes us (and not something for us to attain through good works), then Jesus is offering some mighty incorrect theology here. Yet how can we dismiss the words of Christ as bad theology?

Our understanding is limited when it comes to wrapping our minds around problems such as these. If anything, we could conclude that Jesus was no stranger to hyperbole (hyperbole being a deliberate exaggeration used to get people's attention). One is a little more inclined to sit up and listen when one is confronted with something challenging. And Jesus would've known full well that no human was capable of exceeding the scribes and Pharisees in righteousness. But yet, this reality does not excuse us from obedience to, say, the Ten Commandments. A possible way to think about this would be to consider how God's correction -- and how Jesus' call to be "corrected" -- is a good thing. One might wish, though, that Jesus hadn't resorted to brow-beating to get his point across.

Many of you can remember the warnings you received from your parents when you were children; punishment (or the possibility thereof) served as a deterrent to misbehaving. Today, you're probably thankful that your parents had the wisdom to put some "teeth" into the law they established. This was, after all, the very sort of thing that helped you over time distinguish between right and wrong.

Now, if your parents were unnecessarily harsh or abusive. that's a different story. Children who come from environments such as those can become criminals precisely because of the severity of their treatment at home!

Whether Jesus was unnecessarily harsh or abusive in his sayings recorded in

Matthew is a judgment call I'll let you make, although I might remind you that earlier I used the term "brow-beating," and not jokingly. However, I would also conclude that Jesus is asking people to be a little more serious and a little less lackadaisical about their commitment to the Law. And note that each of the commandments he focuses on (the sixth, seventh, and third) addresses one's relationship to God and to one's neighbor. I'd like to think that he does this in order to show that, while it is well and good to observe the tenets of one's religion, it doesn't mean anything unless one lives in harmony with both God and neighbor. Take the relationships you have with God and with one another seriously. Don't just refrain from killing, refrain from anger. Don't just refrain from adultery, refrain from lust. Don't just refrain from wrongful use of the Lord's name, refrain from oaths and loyalties altogether.

That last one does baffle me a bit, I must say! (Would it preclude one from serving in public office?)

The intensity of Jesus' demands makes me wonder if he's attempting to "weed out" some of the more casual followers; his implicit question would be, "Who's really serious here?" Recall that, for as much grace and forgiveness Jesus offers, there's always a cross to bear. Moreover, being a person of faith is sometimes quite difficult. You may be beset with questions, challenges, and even ridicule. But God will not let our faithfulness in the face of questions, challenges, or ridicule go unnoticed. Indeed, we will, as Jesus says, "be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19).

As for the matter of Jesus proclaiming salvation by works instead of salvation by grace, one could conclude that we become righteous only by God's grace alone, and that we are obedient to the Law out of thanksgiving for the righteousness

God gives us. While Jesus himself does not say this in today's text, we do, indeed, know that this is what generations upon generations of Christians have taught. I hope that our good works reflect the fact that we are saved, and that they are performed not solely because we're afraid of being sent to hell, but because we're thankful for all of God's gifts...right down to the gift of Jesus' harsh words in today's Gospel.

I realize that it may be a bit of a stretch to see them as a "gift," but please bear with me...

And though we are ultimately incapable of the perfect righteousness that Jesus describes, we don't simply give up, either. We struggle and fall and get back up again because we've been given this unique task of living as God's children in the world. With a simple glance through the Old Testament, we can find that God's people weren't a finished product, but always a work in progress. Look at the most brutal portion of today's Gospel text, where Jesus recommends amputation or removal of any body part that causes one to sin. While I may think the imagery is horrible, it at least acknowledges that this progress from sinful to righteous is possible with the "removal" of certain barriers to righteousness. If something is a stumbling block to your becoming an obedient child of God, get rid of it!

And, most importantly, don't give up!

As we wrestle with Scriptures' harsher portions, it's important that we acknowledge them as such, rather than explaining them away until they are completely dulled of their impact. Quite honestly, it isn't easy to find good news for today when confronted with images of self-mutilation and eternal punishment. But then we realize that this is not the only portion of Scripture we'll ever

hear. Indeed, there is much comfort and reassurance to be found elsewhere.

And, thankfully, my one sermon is not the final word. Even as we look to Scripture, we still acknowledge the limitations of the human mind and how little we can comprehend of the mysteries of God. Until that day when all is revealed, keep the faith and know that God will be faithful to you. May you, as Jesus says, "be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Amen.