

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time (A); Matthew 5:17-37

Good morning. It's good to be with you again. Before I say anything else, I just have to mention that every time I hear that phrase from the gospel about looking at a woman with lust in one's heart, I cannot help but think of that story of President Jimmy Carter when he was first running for president. Remember that story? He happened to mention in an interview that, although he had never been unfaithful to his wife, he had, he admitted, "looked at another woman with lust in his heart." Well, it was a very scriptural thing for him to say, but it was also pretty stupid! A lot of people made fun of him for that remark, but to his credit, he took it rather well. It is not so well-known that back on the campaign trail later, he was approached one day by a married couple, and the man introduced his wife to the candidate, and the man added with a smile, "but please Mr. Carter, don't lust after her in your heart." Carter stopped, looked at the man's wife, who was middle aged and on the portly side, and he just played along and said, "But I just can't help it!"

Today's gospel is once again a selection from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. The whole passage takes up chapters 5, 6, & 7 in Matthew's gospel, and it's so important that we devote 6 Sundays to it. We began two weeks ago with the very familiar Beatitudes, which is like a preamble, or a framework, for the whole body of teaching Jesus introduces. We then continued with last week's words of encouragement, that we are the salt of the earth, the light of the world, a city on a hill. Those two passages have set us up for these next two weeks, as Jesus fills us in on the wide implications of his teachings.

You have just heard the gospel passage that I proclaimed. There are two key things that I would like to have you notice here. The first is that Jesus teaches with authority. Notice his style: "You have heard that it was said to your ancestors... But I say to you."

"You have heard that it was said"... "It was also said"... "Again you have heard that it was said to your ancestors"... "But I say to you..." Jesus takes three different areas of the law that come directly from the Ten Commandments, the highest Mosaic law, about killing, adultery, and oaths, and then speaks with unheard-of authority. This is truly extraordinary. In order to appreciate how extraordinary this is, imagine how you would react if Fr. Tim or I were to say to you one Sunday morning, "You have heard that the Church teaches thus and so, but I say to you..." You'd be rather shocked, I imagine, no matter what it was that we had to say. From the very beginning of his public life, Jesus was clearly a different kind of teacher.

The second is what he proclaims in these three areas. I'm not talking about any of these specifics, but the overall meaning: that "unless our righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, we will not enter the kingdom of heaven." And in case we miss the point, he spells it out. It's not just about killing, but it's also about our anger, or contempt, or insulting and abusive language. It's not just about adultery, but it's also about our attitudes, and about treating someone as an object, a sexual fantasy, a toy that we have power over. And it's not just about making a false oath, it's about legalizing, trying to get around the intent of a law, weaseling our way around or out of something. I think if Jesus were to give this Sermon on the Mount to the world of today, about these particular areas, he could have a lot more pointed things to say, and modern-day scribes

and Pharisees he might say them about -- and we could have a lot of fun imagining what or who those might be...there were a couple good instances in the news this week!

But let's not go there...because I don't think we need any extra excuses to find faults with other people's attitudes. Jesus was more interested in calling us to be better people. He was interested in a different way of looking at the law.

I think this is a GREAT passage for Americans, because we have a rather skewed notion of law. I'm not saying that to be offensive, but just to note that we DO tend to be rather legalistic as a people. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. We're generally law-abiding people. In fact, I'd like to ask, how many of you here today, if you happen to be out a little late at night, driving home, and you come to a stoplight, and it's red, and there are no car lights, no pedestrians around anywhere within blocks...how many of you will NOT just sit there patiently, waiting for that light to change to green, but, after looking around carefully, will *drive through* the red light? (show of hands – how many?) Maybe most of us are afraid of getting caught! But really, we're generally inclined to obey the law, aren't we?

Now, I probably don't have to convince you that if I asked that same question in Rome, it'd be a completely different matter. In fact, if I were in front of a room full of Italians and told them what the results of that question were here, everyone would laugh! It isn't be uncommon to see Italians stop and then go through a red light in broad daylight, even with a traffic cop around, as long as there was no danger posed to the traffic. The traffic laws there are treated as “guides” for traffic behavior.

We look at law differently. We're generally law-abiding. But we are also *mimalistic* when it comes to law – we feel that once we satisfy the law, we're free to do whatever we want. We enjoy our freedoms, and more often than not, our attitude is to “live and let live.” But that runs *counter* to what Jesus is saying to us this morning.

So I'd like to suggest to you that Jesus' words today have special force for our legal minds. When Jesus says to us “our righteousness must surpass those of the scribes and Pharisees,” he's telling us that there is an interior way of looking at the law. It's not enough to pay attention to the surface level only of the moral law. There is also a deep interior level to the law. What about: “Honor your father and your mother” ... we can see interior levels there, can't we. How about: “You shall not steal.” ... you can easily be legalistic about that one. “Remember to keep holy the Lord's day” ... that's a really good one for us to think about. And it's true not just about the Ten Commandments, but about any of the things that we say we believe. Jesus calls each one of us to go deeper -- to see him more clearly, follow him more nearly, and love him more dearly. It's about putting our beliefs into practice not by following a set of laws... but by following *him*.

Christianity is not a set of laws. It's a way of life. And that way of life is the path once blazed by the one we know and love as Jesus.

I'd like to invite all of us this morning, as we prepare to meet the Lord in our Eucharist, to listen...to hear how he speaks to our heart, and to the ways he is calling each of us to go deeper.

Deacon Denny Duffell, 2/13/2011