

6 Epiphany A 2011

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

Happy are they

Who never do any wrong.

Do you know any of those people?

Whose way is blameless,

who never do any wrong?

The psalms,

In my experience,

Are not notable for irony.

So if you noticed these words

In this morning's psalm,

And wondered if the writer could possibly be serious,

I think the answer is yes.

The psalmist,

And those who first sang the psalms,

Believed that it was possible  
To keep the law –  
The precious gift of God,  
The gift that assured right relationship with God –  
They believed it was possible to keep the law  
Fully and completely,  
And thus be blameless,  
And never do any wrong.

There is no irony here.

The psalms may not be notable for irony,  
But Jesus is.  
Jesus is an ironic, attention-grabbing,  
Storytelling prophet and preacher,  
And when he tells us to pluck out our eyes  
And cut off our hands  
Rather than risk sin,  
When he tells us that not only our actions,  
But our words and even our thoughts  
Can separate us from God,  
He does get our full attention.

So now he has our attention.

What are we supposed to do with his words?

If we were in a living room,  
Or a lecture hall,  
Or gathered around a seminar table,  
Engaging in the faithful work  
Of reading scripture critically,  
We could at least  
Wrap our minds around this difficult  
And unappealing passage.

If only we were.  
Then we could remember  
That Jesus is an ironic, imaginative speaker  
Who uses startling figures of speech.  
He didn't really think camels could go through a needle's eye.

We could talk about how Jesus uses words,  
And then we could talk about this particular passage  
In the context of the larger portion of the gospel  
From which it is taken,  
The Sermon on the Mount,  
And we could remind each other that the entire so-called sermon,  
A compilation of the teachings of Jesus  
As remembered and later recorded and shaped by his disciples,  
The entire sermon is carefully crafted

To show us Jesus  
As a new Moses, giving a new law,  
Proclaiming a greater, more demanding righteousness  
Than that of Torah.

This Jesus proclaims a new law  
That guides and governs  
Not only behavior,  
But will and intention,  
A law to be written on the heart.

We could remember that Jesus was often focused  
On the emptiness of practice  
For its own sake,  
The harmfulness of practice  
That takes no thought  
For the greater claims of justice and mercy,  
And we could affirm  
That his passion was to live in absolute union  
With the one who is the source of life,  
And his gift was to offer us  
the same life-giving communion.

His greater righteousness  
Is about a life formed more and more

In the image and likeness  
Of the one with whom he was in ongoing,  
Abiding relationship.

If only this were a lecture,  
We could easily understand this passage,  
Put this greater righteousness into perspective,  
And let our minds deal with it.

If only.

And if this were a conversation  
Focused on the authority of scripture,  
Then we could reflect on the church's ongoing struggle  
To remain in faithful dialogue  
With difficult words like these.

We could remember how,  
A generation and more ago,  
In changing times,  
Acknowledging a changed understanding of human development  
And gender roles,  
the respect and safety due to all women and children,  
and the changing law of the societies in which we live,  
acknowledging all these,

Our church, among others,  
confronted one of the undisputed teachings of Jesus,  
His prohibition of divorce,  
And decided that it could no longer uphold it.  
Despite what Jesus said in an earlier time,  
Our church says now  
That there are times when divorce  
Is the most faithful and life-giving option.

If only this were a conversation  
On the authority of scripture,  
We could put this passage,  
Especially the divorce part, in its place.

But we are here,  
Gathered in this church,  
To make eucharist,  
A great act of thanksgiving  
In which we open ourselves up  
To the transforming power  
Of word and sacrament.

Our claim,  
Startling and scary on days like today,  
Is that the words of scripture

Read by the faithful gathered in community  
give life.

It's easy to claim that scripture gives life

When the images and promises

Speak to our deep longings

For peace, beauty, meaning,

Joy.

Remember last week?

You shall be like a garden,

The prophet promised,

Like a spring of water,

Whose waters never fail.

And Jesus told us we were the light of the world.

Now today,

It seems

He's telling us to cut ourselves in pieces.

It's hard on a day like today,

To make the claim that the words of scripture offer life.

Our ancestors in the faith

Knew that living by the law,

The precious gift of God,

Promised life.

The greatest of their teachers told them,  
In choosing to live this way,  
You choose life.  
Choose life,  
So that you and your children may live.

That was their faith,  
Living according to the law.

Faith is not a feeling,  
But a way of living in the world.  
Faith is lived out not only in action,  
But in the gradual shaping of our hearts and minds  
So that they are more and more  
Like the heart and mind  
Of the one whose heart was God's heart,  
And whose mind was God's mind.

That heart and mind  
Can never do any wrong.  
How could God's heart and mind  
Do anything but what is right,  
And just, and loving?

That's the way Jesus lived.

In union with the heart and mind of God,  
Open to that transforming power.  
That's the life he offers us.

When we accept that gift,  
As he did,  
We will be changed,  
And become what we receive.

We are afraid, many of us,  
Of this kind of talk.

We know that as we are,  
we cannot even come close  
To the greater righteousness  
That reflects the righteousness of God.  
And if we cannot even come close,  
Should we try at all?

Do we need to cut off a piece of ourselves  
To show we're trying?  
And if we try and fail,  
Is all lost?

We are afraid of gospel passages like this one,

Because we cannot imagine  
Taking them literally,  
And we do not believe, secretly, we have permission  
To understand them any other way.

So we label them moralistic,  
And walk away,  
Looking for greener pastures  
And quiet waters  
To soothe the soul.

We are so afraid of being labeled moralistic ourselves  
That we forget that there is such a thing  
As a moral life.  
And we find, often,  
In moments of crisis,  
That we are woefully ill-equipped  
To make ethical decisions.

Yet Jesus keeps offering us,  
Not a way to feel,  
But a way to live.  
A way to walk before God in holiness and righteousness,  
All our days,  
As the prayer book invites us to say.

There is no one recipe for this righteousness.

There is a greater righteousness

Than following all the rules.

It may not look for us

The way it looks

In this attention-grabbing,

Uncomfortable gospel.

But now that Jesus has our attention,

Perhaps we can begin to wonder:

What does righteousness look like for me?

For all of us together, in community?

We no longer believe it is possible to do no wrong.

But let's not forget that we are still called

To do right,

And to walk with God.

But so what?

Maybe you came here this morning

Wondering how to make a good life better,

And this difficult gospel  
Speaks a word of truth to you.

But what if you came here this morning  
confused,

Frightened, lonely,

Even in anguish?

What if you came here this morning

Knowing that

Unlike the happy ones of the psalm,

You had in fact done wrong,

Perhaps a wrong that could not be put right?

What if you came here this morning

Concerned not with righteousness,

But with survival?

Then where is the good news?

Beyond the words of scripture,

Deeper than the words and actions of liturgy,

There is a power and a love

That keep this broken and beautiful world spinning

And hold us grounded within it.

We cannot explain it  
Or control it,  
But we can reach for it.

It will not keep us safe,  
Or take our pain away,  
But it will offer meaning,  
And freedom, and peace.

This, at least, is my experience.

Outside and around and through this gospel,  
Or any of the lessons  
We heard this morning,  
We can hear the words of life,  
Words that offer a vision broader  
Than we can create,  
Deeper than we can go.

There is life speaking through the words,  
Hope in the story.

We can hear life  
In the story we tell in the Eucharistic prayer.

We can find life  
In the community that listens for us  
When we can hear nothing  
And have no hope.

There is a great story  
Beyond and shining through this difficult  
And uncomfortable,  
Even comfortless gospel.

It is the story of the power of love.

Love that springs up out of nothing,  
and renews itself continually  
And cannot be hidden or undone  
Or killed.

A love that makes its home in us,  
That will never shrink back  
From our pain, our fear,  
Our despair.

A love that gives us courage,  
And endurance, and hope.

That love will come and find us,  
Wherever we are,

And remain with us

Until we are ready to get up

And continue,

Until we are ready to enter again into the story

Of love in the world.

Whatever you brought with you to this place today,

That story is yours to claim,

And so choose life.