

Epiphany 6                      2/12/23  
Matthew 5:21-37                A

## SERMON TEXT IS OUR GOSPEL LESSON FROM THE 5<sup>TH</sup> CHAPTER OF MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

WC Fields was a well-known boozier and womanizer, who cared nothing for living a Christian life, so a man was quite surprised one day when he caught Fields reading the Bible. "What are you doing?" he asked in puzzlement. "Looking for loopholes," growled Fields.

Ever since the devil first whispered his lie in the garden, "Did God really say," we have doubted, disbelieved, and distrusted God's Word. And, so we take what God says in His Word and twist and turn it to make it say what we want it to say.

Take our Gospel this morning. Our Gospel this Sunday is once again from the Sermon on the Mount. In it, Jesus talks about anger, adultery, the careless severing of marital bonds, and frivolous oaths. He is teaching us that these reveal what is in our heart towards our neighbor. Jesus is teaching us that we are to have a holy heart, filled only with love for our neighbor.

Notice the words of Jesus in our lesson this morning: "You've heard it said..., but I say to you..." Jesus applies the law to our thoughts, words, and deeds so that none of us can escape its accusation and condemnation. You have heard it was said, "You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment...But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment." You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery...But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." You have heard that it was said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him

give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery.” You have heard that it was said, “You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn. But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all...Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.”

Rather than see ourselves in the mirror of the law, we foolishly turn these words of Jesus into a checklist: “Murder, never did that, [√]check.” “Adultery, never did that, [√]check.” “Divorce, never been divorced, [√]check.” “Swore a foolish oath, never did that, [√]check.” We turn the law into a checklist to justify ourselves and become Pharisees, “Look at me, what a good little boy, girl, am I. I’m so glad I’m not like so-and-so.”

Think about your heart for a moment. Consider what your words and deeds reveal about what is in your heart. Does your love measure up to the standard set by Christ?

Maybe you haven’t murdered someone, but have you called them – or thought them -- a fool? Have you remained angry – keeping a record of your neighbor’s wrongs, refusing to forgive, letting the sun go down on your anger? Maybe you haven’t committed adultery, but have you laughed at off-color humor? Have you lusted after someone other than your spouse, enjoyed pornography on your computer? Maybe you haven’t left your spouse in the heat of passion for another, but have you honored and cherished your spouse? Maybe you have never sworn a foolish oath, “God if you will do this for me, then I will do ... for you;” but have you broken a promise you made? Have you gossiped about your neighbor? Have you told lies, most likely to make yourself look all the better?

Wow! There are no loopholes in Jesus' words. No compromises; no "I did the best that I could." Jesus' words are not a checklist to show our righteousness, but a **mirror to show us our sin.**

How the words of Jesus apply to us, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness (Mt 23:37)." We can put on the mask of self-righteousness to look good in the eyes of the world, but inside, we are by our very natures dead in sin.

The author Edgar Allen Poe wrote a story called "The Tell Tale Heart." I hesitate to dwell on the gruesome, especially so close to Valentine's Day, but it's a story about a man who murders his neighbor and then buries him under the floorboards. But, the murderer hears the man's heart beating growing louder and LOUDER and **LOUDER**, until the beating of the dead man's heart drives him insane.

What's in your heart? Jesus' words this Sunday tell us what's in our hearts. Yes, we try to hide our sin under the floorboards, out of sight of the world. But, the guilt and shame of our sin haunts and hounds us, so that we can only say, "I have sinned. I have sinned against my neighbor and against God. I am sorry for what I have done."

II. When we see what is truly in our hearts, we can rejoice in this: Jesus ascended a mount to deliver a sermon. And, He ascended another Mount called Calvary. He went to that Mount carrying all our anger, our refusals to forgive, the times we've wished harm and disaster upon our neighbor; all our lust and sins against marriage; all our lies and gossip, all the times we didn't keep our word; all the times we failed to love one another.

He took all our sins and nailed them to His cross. There, He bled all over them and died for them. It is His bleeding and His dying on that cross which forgives your sin. It is that forgiveness that makes you His Bride, the Church.

III. After David's sins with Bathsheba, Nathan showed him his sin and he repented in the well-known words of his Psalm, "Create in me a clean heart, O Lord." God did. And, He gave you a clean heart in the new birth of your baptism, the holy heart of Christ Himself that has no love of sin, only love for God and love for neighbor. Dear Saint of God, you have the heart of Christ. So, we ask that most Lutheran of questions: What does this mean?

Baptized and living in Christ, living with the holy heart of Christ as our very own, it means that we have no desire, no craving, for sin. And, our lives reveal what is in our heart.

We honor all life as a gift from God to be ended by Him, including the life of the unborn and the elderly and infirm. We do not stay angry at our neighbor, even one who has sinned against us and hurt us, and we do not hate and wish to "get even". As God is reconciled to all, we seek to be reconciled to all and live at peace with all people. We honor marriage as a good blessing from God, the lifelong union of one man and one woman, which needs to be emphasized in our day. We lead a sexually pure life even in our thoughts and words, avoiding all sexual temptation, understanding that adulterous thoughts lead to adultery. We don't swear frivolous oaths with God, bargaining with Him to get our way, so that He will do something that pleases us -- that we want -- with the promise that we will do something.

And we are merciful, kind, and forgiving towards our neighbor. God has had mercy on us in Christ even when we failed to keep the law, and that is the mercy that we show our neighbor. This is why we learn the 10 Commandments -- they teach us how we are to love God and love our neighbor.

The holy heart of Christ that beats in us, Dear Saints. We reveal that heart by reflecting Christ to the world, His forgiveness, His mercy, His love.