

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

AN ALTERNATIVE TO DISMEMBERMENT

Sermon for Epiphany 6A – Mt. 5:21-37

LPC, 2/16/14

Call me a party pooper, but I've never been much into self-mutilation. This may come as a surprise to those of you who were at my very first dinner party in Wheeling, when I cut off the top of my left pinky finger while slicing tomatoes, but I do insist that that was an accident. Believe or not, I never do that kind of thing on purpose. As a matter of fact, dismemberment holds a particular horror for me. I couldn't go swimming in the ocean for years after seeing the movie *Jaws*.

For that reason, Jesus' teaching this morning from the Gospel of Matthew is rather off-putting to me. Not the part about making peace with your neighbor before coming before God's altar: that just makes sense. And not even the part about lustful leering being tantamount to committing adultery. Sure, it's overstated, but having been on the receiving end of lustful leering once or twice in my youth, I do believe that lustful leering indicates a tendency toward exploitative attitudes toward other people, which Jesus clearly opposed, and so do I.

No, what bothers me is this stuff about tearing out a sinful eye or cutting off a sinful hand. Now, only the insane take this literally (quite a few insane people have), but this image of self-punishment is so drastic and repulsive that I sometimes miss what Jesus is really saying here.

In this whole section, Jesus is riffing on one of his favorite themes throughout his ministry: that merely obeying the letter of the law is not enough. Righteousness is not acquired through the fulfillment of obligations. Righteousness comes from God alone. That God treats us as beloved children is not because we are so good, but because God is so good. Our response to that goodness and love is to return love, and to be single-minded in doing that.

Yes, the law is necessary to protect the innocent as much as possible in a world where people are not single-minded in love. But if a person is single-minded in love, the law takes care of itself. A person single-minded in love will exceed the requirements of the law without even trying.

Now, who among us is that single-minded? I know I'm not, and I'm even a professional Christian. As a matter of fact, many of the distractions I experience from single-minded love of God stem from my being busy serving religion and the church.

How can we practice a discipline of single-minded love of God without falling into the very trap Jesus is preaching against: scrupulous fulfillment of the law without love behind it?

I have a suggestion. This is not the only way to cultivate single-minded love of God, but it is fresh in my mind because I have just written a paper on it for my doctoral

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program. I hope this is but the first of many instances where I can share with you some of the things I am studying.

The discipline I am talking about is called the examen. This is an exercise developed by St. Ignatius Loyola, who lived in the fifteen-hundreds and founded the Society of Jesus, also known as the Jesuits. The Jesuits were not cloistered: they lived and worked in the world, and St. Ignatius was concerned that their prayer lives and their active lives be fully integrated, one with the other. The examen is one of the ways he developed to facilitate this integration.

The examen is easily learned and practiced. Typically, one engages in the examen at the end of the day, as part of bedtime prayers. One looks back on the day just past, considering significant events and how one felt at the time. What aspects and incidents bring you closer to God and God's kingdom, and which aspects and incidents feel alienating from God and God's kingdom?

But let's start at the beginning. Like any prayer discipline, it is well to begin in a comfortable but upright posture, becoming aware of your body and breathing. You then cultivate an awareness of God's love surrounding you. One of Ignatius' foundational beliefs is that God deeply loves human beings and desires relationship with them. Letting this knowledge really seep in is the preparation for beginning the examen.

Ignatius himself describes five steps to the process. Step one is giving thanks. Having started by being aware of God's all-encompassing love, the movement toward thanking God is a natural one. Step two is petition: asking God for grace to know oneself truly, for making a fruitful examen and moving toward understanding and freedom.

Now we are ready to review the past day, asking, "When was I closest to God?" and "When was God most distant?" Other forms of these questions that might be helpful are: "What was I most/ least grateful for today?", "When was I most/ least alive?" "When was I most/ least connected to God, to others and to creation?"

The fourth step is to ask God for forgiveness where you have not been conformed to God and God's kingdom. Finally, the fifth step is to look to the future, resolving to amend your life, with God's help, to become more conformed to God and God's kingdom. Transitioning out of the process, we pray to continue in the awareness of God's presence and love.

I am happy to provide materials to anyone desiring to pursue this discipline in the effort to become more single-minded in love of God. You've got to admit, it beats self-mutilation.