

THE DOUBLE-BLACK DIAMOND SERMON
Sermon for Epiphany 6A-Mt. 5:21-37
LPC, 2/12/17

Those of you who ski know that there are difficulty classifications for ski slopes. A green circle signifies the easiest slopes, a blue square marks intermediate slopes, and a black diamond is the sign for the difficult slopes. There is such a thing as a “double-black diamond.” These slopes typically are very steep, often narrow with plenty of obstacles to avoid, and bumpy. Minefields, in other words. Plenty of ways to die. Today’s Gospel is a double-black diamond.

I have personal reasons for finding this passage hard to preach. Believe it or not, I have been angry. Jesus here says that makes me “liable to judgment” the same as murder. I am not sure I have ever used the exact words, “you fool,” but I have said things like, “You idiot!” or “What a jerk!” This makes me “liable to the hell of fire.”

To be fair, I doubt I am alone here. There are lots of ways of saying “You fool.” My lovely, kind mother hated Bill Clinton and could not bring herself to say his name. Mr. Clinton to her was always, “that man.” Believe me, if my saintly mother is capable of infusing such an innocent phrase with as much venom as most people say “You fool,” than absolutely everybody must be guilty of this particular sin.

Moving on, I find myself on the bad side of every one of these pronouncements. I am not to my knowledge on anybody’s fink list at the moment, but I am a fink list alumna. I can tell you unequivocally that I have no intention of self-mutilation no matter how badly I sin. Although I am not in the habit of looking at anybody lustfully, I can’t say that has never been the case. And I am not divorced, but I know, love, and stand with people who have been divorced.

In other words, how can I possibly preach this segment of the Sermon on the Mount without hypocrisy? Simply put, I can’t. But there are four points I want to make from this passage, at least to myself.

First, much of this passage demonstrates the didactic device of “rabbinic hyperbole.” As I’ve preached before, this is a method, commonly used by rabbis of the time, of grossly overstating a point to make sure that some small part of it would penetrate the dense skulls of their students. Anger obviously is not the same as murder, lust is not the same as adultery, and God does not want people to blind and lame themselves. But anger and lust are serious sins. Even if they don’t result in injury to another person, they damage the person who cultivates them. You have to admit, Jesus has found quite a memorable way of getting that point across.

Secondly, if these are the standards for admission to the kingdom of heaven: never to feel anger or lust, never to quarrel or divorce, never to sin without auto-amputation, then ain’t nobody gettin’ in. We are all at God’s mercy, even the apparently righteous among us. None of us does this without God.

Third, this passage falls in the midst of a sermon in which Jesus is letting the disciples know that fulfilling God’s law is not a checklist. You do not earn eternal life simply by honoring the Sabbath, respecting your parents, and avoiding murder, theft, adultery, covetousness etc.

God's law is more than the Ten Commandments. If I fulfill the letter of the law and have not love, as St. Paul tells us, I am a clanging cymbal, making a lot of noise but having no effect.

That brings us to the fourth and most important point. What this section is really all about is Jesus' command that the disciples remain in relationship with each other. All the things Jesus condemns: anger, insults, quarrelling, lust, divorce, false swearing... all of these are things that alienate people from one another.

Remember that Jesus is speaking to the disciples here, not the general public. He knows that this type of teaching is likely to be really difficult for those new to it – those “infants in Christ” that St. Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians. This is teaching that the world is going to find almost impossible to even hear. But Jesus wants the disciples, the people who are to be his spokespersons, to hear it and take it to heart.

Jesus also knows that any group of people, no matter how united in purpose, is likely to have problems with this. People get angry, quarrel, fall out, get alienated. Jesus really wants the disciples to make an effort to stay united because maintaining relationship is part of Jesus' message. So he offers a way for them to do it.

When they come before the altar of God they are to come as people in relationship with each other. If they cannot do that, they are to interrupt their worship and reestablish connection with each other. This is the one part of this passage that I believe we are to take absolutely literally. We are to come before God together as brothers and sisters in Christ or we might as well not come at all.

On one occasion I actually did leave church before receiving communion. I was not angry with any one person but I was angry in general. My heart was not in the right place to join with my brothers and sisters at God's table. I had to get straightened out first. With God's help I did.

On another occasion, during the passing of the Peace before communion, a woman I knew was furious with me grabbed me and hugged me. This in fact is the whole reason we do the Peace as part of our worship. The Peace is not a substitute for Coffee Hour but a time to affirm relationship with our brothers and sisters before we come before the altar. If you've ever wondered where the Peace in Eucharistic worship comes from, it is here, in the Word of Jesus.

When Jesus talks of making peace with your accuser so that you might not be thrown into prison consider that unforgiveness is itself a prison. People who refuse to forgive create a prison of sorts for the unforgiven, but end up in a prison of their own creation.

I know there are all sorts of political views in this room. I believe that here at Lawrencefield we have done a good job of remaining in relationship with fellow Lawrencefielders who may disagree with us. But outside of church I suspect everyone of us has looked at the “other side” and thought “You fool” or something equivalent. I believe Jesus is calling us to something else. By all means let us stand for what we believe is right, but if we are to follow Jesus, let's not forget to stand with our brothers and sisters before God.