

Year A Epiphany 6 Compassion and Community Matthew 5 vv21 to 37

In these Sundays since the Epiphany, we have been witnessing the excitement of those who encounter Jesus – the excitement of knowing he is the one they have been waiting for, the one who is going to change their lives and make the world all right. We have been present alongside them, learning what it means to have found the long-expected one, the one who will make the world all right.

We have discovered, with them, that the kingdom of God Jesus brings with him does not operate the same way as the kingdoms of the world. Power is not power. Strength is not strength. Riches are not riches. In God's kingdom, power is love and compassion. Strength is self-giving and peacemaking. Riches are the treasures of God's steadfast loving-kindness, given without our meriting it, and God's promise that we are being drawn towards perfection and can choose to be a part of that perfection. The perfection of God's kingdom, we are learning, is upside-down in comparison to the world's idea of perfection. Those cast out and pushed aside because they don't fit the world's idea of perfection, those bowed down under the yoke of poverty and oppression and inequalities because they cannot or will not play the game according to the cutthroat rules of the world – these are adored by God Jesus tells us in the Beatitudes. God will heal their wounds, will lift them up. And the ones playing by the rules of the world? They have a choice to make – stop or perish. Choose God...or not.

Last week we heard that God – through the prophets and then, in the flesh through Jesus – had something to say in particular to those who had perfected their outward signs of devotion and worship of God for a few brief hours of their week but then did not show love of God in love of neighbour or earth during the rest of their week. These are in particular peril because they are not righteous like

they think they are. We must be more righteous, Jesus cautions, we must truly be in right relationship with God, with each other, and with the earth. Jesus offers us life with God and makes it clear that life with God is a whole of life with God – a new way of thinking, of being, of acting in the world – and he really drives this home today in what we hear of his Sermon on the Mount.

There is no “half-way in” option for life in God’s kingdom. You are either in or you are out. Jesus lets us know that following God’s ways means following God’s ways through and through – with heart, mind, body, and soul...not just in outward acts of devotion, not just some of the time...through and through, all the time. We can do this. We heard in our first reading that we have the ability to follow the commandments. To act faithfully is a matter of your own choice, the teacher writes (Sirach 15:15-20). “My yoke is easy and my burden is light,” Jesus assures us. Choosing the way of life, the way of love, compassion, and peace is easy and light he says. But it is a yoke and it is a burden – as easy and light as it is – because it is something we must do. Always having love, compassion, and peace within us is a constant work in progress. We will not do the right thing all the time. Being “all in” is a process. This is one of the reasons why it is so important for us on our journey to gather together regularly in worship of God. Not only are we in the presence of God – learning more about God and strengthening our relationship with God, learning how to *be* in relationship with God, we are also in the presence of each other – learning how to be in right relationship with each other in love and support and encouragement...bumbling our way toward the intended perfection together, learning how to think, and be, and do in the world...together.

Jesus' way of telling us today about the "all in or not in at all" way of life in God's kingdom sounds a little strange to our ears far removed from his lifetime. It sounds difficult and harsh – even if you are angry with a brother or sister, he says, you are liable to judgement. If your right hand causes you to turn from God, cut it off, he declares. Today's teachings can feel a little random – as if they are separate sayings of Jesus just thrown together. We jump from murder to adultery to swearing oaths. These things *are* tied together by the overall message Jesus is trying to get across to us. Jesus has not come to abolish the law but to fulfil the law, as he explained last week. Jesus takes the laws and shows us how to truly live into them – inside and out – so that the laws can accomplish what they are meant to accomplish...total reconciliation among all creation and with God. Jesus shows to us today that all of God's ways are to be understood within a trusting, compassionate, reconciled humanity.

Jesus begins, very wisely, with the offense of murder. Most people listening to him, as it is with us, will not take issue with him mentioning murder because we have not committed the murder of another human being. We will then willingly follow Jesus' logic as he brings up smaller, more common offenses. I specifically mention murder of a human being because people in general have placed a scale of values on all life with human life being the most valuable. And, unfortunately, many, many people, in not valuing the life of other creatures and of the world, have no problem snuffing out that life. All life is precious to God because God created all things. Each little sparrow is known to God, we are told. The flowers of the field are in God's care, we are told. We must not only be aware of the extent of God's love for all living things but this care must be ours – through and through, Jesus explains today. It is not enough that we do not commit murder.

We must allow ourselves to be filled up to the core with God's love and compassion so that we do not even have the thoughts that could lead to murder, no anger...no quarrelling. And when we fall short of this, as we certainly will, we are to reconcile with each other before we continue the process of reconciliation with God. This is why we share the *peace* of Christ with each other before we share the *body* of Christ together.

Jesus moves on to divorce which was a very heated issue in Jesus' time. Two of the leading teachers at that time, Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai, were famously divided over the issue of divorce. The school of Hillel favored a more permissive approach to divorce that allowed for divorce even in the case that a wife ruins her husband's meal. The school of Shammai, however, upheld a much stricter view that only permitted divorce in the most extreme cases. Jesus does seem to lean in the direction of the stricter school of thought – mentioning divorce only in the case of adultery. This is meant to protect women from being discarded like old clothing. In a few weeks time, we will hear the story of the Samaritan woman who meets Jesus at the well. She has had multiple husbands. It could be that she is an absolutely wonderful woman but a lousy cook. Whatever the reason for multiple marriages, being passed from husband to husband would earn her the scorn of the other woman, the disrespect of other men, and certainly the harm of damaged self-worth. Love in God's kingdom is to penetrate to our core, not be dependent on the quality of the next meal you serve.

Divorce as a hot button issue has largely fallen off the map but society in general and the Church has had a succession of hot button issues with which to deal. We may immediately think of the ordination of women or the rights of the LGBTQ

community but there are other core issues...church-dividing issues as foundational as how we are to worship the God who is the God of all of us. If I asked you how many Christian denominations there are in the world, what would you say? Five? Ten? Two dozen? I'm sure you will be just as astonished and horrified as I was to learn, "According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, there are approximately 41,000 Christian denominations and organisations in the world today."¹ Our motto seems to be: When in disagreement, split with each other. This is precisely what Jesus would have us avoid by practicing the way of love and compassion.

Jesus moves on to swearing oaths. In those days, promises and contracts were almost always verbal. There was no paper readily available for people to sign on the dotted line. It was customary for people to add validity to their word by using something as back-up...heaven, Jerusalem, their own life, and so on. It would be like a Christian swearing an oath on the bible in a court of law today. Jesus is pointing out the obvious – swearing on something often does not mean the person's words are any more true or trustworthy. In fact, when I was teaching, if a student of mine was swearing up and down that he "didn't do it", "Cross my heart and hope to die, Ms. Montague," I was usually more suspicious that he did do it. Jesus is saying that our word should be honest and true, aligning with our intentions. We don't need back-up. We need truth. Our insides need to match our outsides – practicing compassion and trust through and through.

¹ [Christian Denominations: A Comprehensive Guide \(2023\) - Christian Valour](#) accessed February 8, 2023. This website argues that this uses too vague a definition of "denomination" but concedes that there is likely anywhere from 200 up to 3000 different denomination.

We may not be dealing with the same issues of murder, divorce, and swearing oaths that Jesus is addressing in his context but the foundation remains the same. Jesus lives and teaches a life of truth and compassion – and that never is out of date.

There is one final point about the life Jesus leads us into and I found a reflection on this very point in a book called, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*.

The authors² write:

How can we creatively respond to Jesus' call: 'Be compassionate as [God] is compassionate'? How can we make God's compassion the basis and source of our lives? Where can God's compassionate presence become visible in our everyday lives? How is it possible for us, broken and sinful human beings, to follow Jesus Christ and thus become manifestations of God's compassion? What does it mean for us to enter into solidarity with our fellow human beings and offer them obedient service?

The message that comes to us in the New Testament is that the compassionate life is a life together. Compassion is not an individual character trait, a personal attitude, or a special talent, but a way of living together. When Paul exhorts the Christians of Philippi to live a compassionate life with mind of Christ, he gives a concrete description of what he means: 'There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but everybody is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of his own interests first but everybody thinks of the other people's interest instead' (Ph.2:3-4).

Moreover, Paul stresses that the compassionate life is a life in community: 'If our life in Christ means anything to you, if love can persuade at all, or the Spirit that we have in common, or any tenderness and sympathy, then

² Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, Henri J. M. Nouwen

be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind' (Ph.2:1-2).

Precisely because we are so inclined to think in terms of individual greatness and personal heroism, it is important for us to reflect carefully on the fact that the compassionate life is community life. We witness to God's compassionate presence in the world by the way we live and work together. Those who were first converted by the Apostles revealed their conversion not by feats of individual stardom but by entering a new life in community: 'The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. They went *as a body* to the temple every day and met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone; (Acts 2:44-47). God's compassion became evident in a radically new way of living, which so amazed and surprised outsiders that they said, 'See how they love each other.' A compassionate life is a life in which fellowship with Christ reveals itself in a new fellowship among those who follow him. We tend so often to think of compassion as an individual accomplishment, that we easily lose sight of its essentially communal nature. By entering into fellowship with Jesus Christ, who emptied himself and became as we are and humbled himself by accepting death on the cross, we enter into a new relationship with each other. The new relationship with Christ and the new relationship with each other can never be separated (49-51).

We are not only to be Christ's body in the world, we are to share his mind and show his mind to the world through all that we say and do as a compassionate *community* of one heart, mind, body, and soul. As Paul said, "we are God's servants, working together." First be reconciled, says Jesus...and then come offer your gift to God.