

Perfectly Rich

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The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
The Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Leviticus 19:1-18; 1 Corinthians 3:10-23; Matthew 5:38-48

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” -- Matthew 5:48

“You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you. . . .” These are famous words of Jesus that he repeats six times in the section on the Sermon on the Mount that we’ve been reading in worship for the past few weeks.

In verse twenty-one he says that we’ve heard that we shouldn’t murder, but he says that we’re liable to judgment evening if we’re angry with a sister or brother.

In verse twenty-seven, Jesus says that we’ve heard that we shouldn’t commit adultery, but he says that even lustful desire is adulterous. And we should note in passing that Jesus is addressing heterosexual males with these words.

In verse thirty-one, speaking again to straight men, Jesus says that it was said that a properly-filed divorce is okay, but he says that only a cheating wife makes divorce permissible.

In verse thirty-three, Jesus not only prohibits swearing falsely, he prohibits swearing at all. Don’t drag God – or heaven or earth or anything else over which you have no control – into your interpersonal affairs. Just say yes or no and then honor your word.

Today’s reading picks up the fifth of these six antitheses, in which Jesus seems to be altering or radicalizing the Jewish law.

At least that’s what the commentators say, but I’m not so sure that that’s actually what’s going on in this passage. I don’t think Jesus was addressing himself as much to the law as to the received wisdom about the law, or what was popularly considered by his contemporaries to be the authoritative interpretation of the law.

It wasn’t with the law, after all, that Jesus had his repeated run-ins; it was with the teachers of the law – the folks the gospel writers refer to as scribes, Pharisees, and Saducees. It was between Jesus and them, and not Jesus and his religion, that the New Testament depicts the head-butting. I think it’s crucial that we Christians remember this whenever we read the New Testament so that we don’t fall into or perpetuate Christian anti-Semitism, which does not exist in the New Testament.

But exist it does. Lynn Jones gave me an article a few weeks back with the disheartening news that in Poland, where virtually all Jews were exterminated during the Second World War, a recent national survey revealed that 63% of Poles believe that a Jewish cabal controls international banking and the media, even though 90% of the same people say they’ve never met a Jew. And some 23% of Poles blame Jews for the death of Jesus and believe that Christian blood is used in Jewish rituals. Christian anti-Semitism is far from gone, and it is incumbent upon people like us, who are willing to examine our faith carefully and think critically about it, that we recognize the points at which our faith can become an excuse for hate. Today’s antitheses -- “You have heard that it was said,

but I say to you” is one of those points.

So that’s why I emphasize, again and again, that Jesus was not a Christian. He was a radical, messianic Jewish reformer, and there’s not the slightest evidence that he intended to found a new religion called Christianity, or that he intended for his followers to be called Christians.

So when we read or hear these antitheses, we have to remember that we are not hearing a Christian teacher abrogating the Jewish law. We are hearing one Jewish teacher, among many others, articulating for his students what he believed to be a truer understanding of their faith than the understandings other Jewish teachers held.

And in today’s reading, which is the climax of this series of antitheses, Jesus addresses the issue of the status quo or what society thinks is okay. Let’s have a look at what he says.

In verse thirty-eight, Jesus says that the old law – which is the same law we live with today – of an-eye-for-an-eye-and-a-tooth-for-a-tooth doesn’t work. Centuries later, Martin Luther King, Jr., also said that it didn’t work; he said that in such a world everyone winds up blind and toothless.

An-eye-for-an-eye-and-a-tooth-for-a-tooth is backwoods justice, justice the way the Hatfields and the McCoys would do it: you hurt one of ours, we’ll hurt one of yours. You kill one of ours, we’ll kill one of yours. That way, we’re even.

Well, no, actually, Jesus says, you’re not. You’re not even, you’re in a desperate race toward the bottom. Do the math. When one person hurts another, one person is hurt; when one person is hurt for hurting another, two people are hurt. How can that possibly be considered a net gain?

This is the zero-sum thinking criticized by that bumper sticker that says, “Why do we kill people who kill people to show that killing people is wrong?” Putting someone to death for having put someone to death is retributive justice – a fancy, politically-correct way of saying retribution, and retribution, Jesus says in today’s reading, is a lose-lose policy. Retribution means everybody loses.

Here’s the way you win: “Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

You win, Jesus says, not by opposing evil with evil, but by opposing it with good, and you do that because you believe that you already have the resources to do so.

Someone strikes one cheek? God gave you two. Someone sues you for your dress shirt? You’ve got a jacket to offer as well. Someone forces you to go one mile? You’ve got the strength to go two.

That’s the key to understanding what Jesus is talking about in this passage. He’s not talking about weakness or capitulation or serene oblivion.

He’s talking about spiritual and physical strength. He’s talking about the inner resources, given to us by God and cultivated by us through practice and habit, that make us rich. He’s talking about responding to evil as God does, which is through goodness: “[F]or he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

Jesus calls that perfect and calls us to be perfect that way. From God’s richness – physical and spiritual richness – God confronts evil with goodness. Jesus is telling us to do the same, to be perfectly rich, as God is.

I want to wrap this up with a homey little illustration. We live in a society, you and I, that tells us we don’t have enough – enough time, enough money, enough

relationships, enough goodies. There are people who are paid, some of them rather handsomely, to generate through advertising something that psychologists call “need synthesis,” that is, they present a product in such a way that you and I are convinced after seeing their ad that we need that product, when we didn’t realize we needed that product before seeing their ad. It’s the ad, not the lack, that generates the need. We’re surrounded by this and bombarded with the message of constant lack 24/7.

Jesus’s words in the Sermon on the Mount, both in today’s reading and in much of his sermon, refute that notion. When Jesus tells us to be perfect, as God is perfect, he’s not telling us to do the impossible. He never did that. He’s telling us that we already have enough to create a world that isn’t dog-eat-dog or where everyone winds up blind and toothless. He’s telling us that we’re already perfectly rich, and he’s asking us to use the spiritual and physical resources we already have as God has already shown us, through creation, how to use them. It’s religion, not rocket science.

Now here’s the homey illustration. When I was taught to drive, about a hundred years ago, I was taught that when you want to turn left at an intersection with a traffic light, if you’re the first car in line you’re allowed to pull into the intersection and wait for oncoming traffic to clear. If you’re the second or third or tenth car in line wanting to turn left, you wait at the stop line until the car under the light has cleared the intersection before you pull into the space that will block traffic coming from the side directions.

When did that change, so that we now have two, three, four cars in line to turn left when a light turns red and all the rest of us have to sit and wait for these people who seem to be in a desperate hurry to clear the intersection? Is everyone’s life but mine so busy, so full of urgent needs, that they can’t wait at the stop line and let others take their turn when it’s their turn?

We are, it seems to me, just the people Harry Emerson Fosdick described in 1930 in a line in his most famous hymn, “rich in things and poor in soul.” Our consumerist society has generated material wealth and spiritual poverty. Jesus Christ can give us back our spiritual riches. It’s simple: Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.