

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh  
February 16, 2020- Sixth Sunday After Epiphany- A  
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

**Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 15:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Cor 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37**

**“To act faithfully is a matter of your choice... For great is the wisdom of the Lord; he is mighty in power and sees everything... He has not commanded you to be wicked, and he has not given anyone permission to sin.” †**

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The book of Sirach, which I quoted, is part of what we call the Apocrypha, those secondary books of the Septuagint or Greek OT, that are not included in the current Jewish Canon of Scriptures... and yet we honor them and hold them in high regard. Sirach is meant as a guidebook for the worshiping community (another name for the book is Ecclesiasticus, Latin for 'belonging to the Church'), conveying to us God's wisdom and it's also a guide to ethical behavior.

It's remarkable that Matthew's version of the Gospel (which we have been hearing this Epiphany) is the only one that uses the word '*ekklesia*' or 'Church,' when referring to the community of believers. The author is writing for a particular, Jewish community in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine, a community of Jews that believe in Jesus.

The author of this Gospel encourages us, the people of God, to transcend brokenness, hatred, violence, and revenge (all too common in our society today) and live as true members of God's Kingdom.

One of the ways this is conveyed is by the so-called 'antitheses' we heard on this morning. These are a collection of Jesus' sayings found in Matthew's Gospel, that demonstrate how radically Jesus understood the Torah, 'the Law of Moses.' Their classic structure is: "you have heard it said, in ancient times... but I say to you..." These teachings of Jesus take it up a notch...

Jesus is calling for *transformation*, for radical change... turning us away from specific actions or reactions and asking us to concentrate on the intention behind such actions.

- Instead of focusing on the act of murder, he asks us to turn our attention to the anger and the inclination for revenge that lie behind such a violent act.

- Instead of focusing on the act of adultery, Jesus addresses the greater concern over the desire for and the coveting of, that which is not ours... on selfish desire and dehumanization.
- His words on divorce, similarly turn the tables and radically challenge the patriarchal order of his day... shifting the onus of responsibility in matters of marital fidelity away from women, to men. His focus is on treating another with respect; he calls on married couples to act in ways that will preserve their unity rather than seek an easy way out.
- Finally, with regard to taking oaths, Jesus says “let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, no.’” Higher righteousness is not about promises, its about truthfulness. I think that’s a lesson our leaders need to hear, its about right intention and truth.

Jesus insists that we consider the feelings and the intent behind our actions... and that we seek to follow God’s intent and will. If we have a conflict with a brother or a sister, we should go and seek forgiveness and be reconciled with that person before doing anything else. Love our enemies? Reconcile with my brother or sister before I worry about reconciling with God?

But... What do we do when we find ourselves at odds with the teachings of Jesus? I don’t know about you, but today’s political and social climate makes it hard for me to stay calm and forgiving. How do we disagree with Jesus’ conclusions based on our own personal experience? That’s the rub... I can only remind you of one of the major aspects of our liturgy, our worship together... Before we come together to the altar, before we share in the breaking of the bread, we confess our sins... we seek forgiveness from God and our neighbors. Only once we’re reconciled with those we’ve hurt and those who’ve hurt us, are we able to share in Christ’s Body.

The Eucharistic Prayers, themselves, reinforce this, and remind us of Jesus’ teaching: In Rite I, we say we offer ‘our selves, our souls, and bodies’ as a sacrifice to God that ‘he may dwell in us, and we in him’ (*BCP, p336*)... In Eucharistic Prayer C, we ask God to ‘Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal’ (*BCP, p 372*). Whenever we come to this table *sure of ourselves*, we need to consider what Jesus said, we are forgiven *only* as we are able to forgive others.

An ancient tradition in Judaism, certainly known by Matthew’s community, is the belief that whenever a group of people studied Torah (The Law of Moses) together,

they experienced 'the *Shekinah*.' The root of this Hebrew word means, 'to dwell.' Whenever people study the Torah together, they are said to be in 'the shadow of God's presence,' the *Shekinah*, God dwells among them. For the author of Matthew, Jesus is the *Shekinah* for the *ekklesia*... God's presence dwelling among the community of believers... "When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them" (Mt 18.20).

As we come to the Altar today, let's remember that *Jesus is here now in our midst...* and let's listen to and follow Jesus... who came to live among us, as one of us... not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it... and thus, to reveal God's will and love for each of us.

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