

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A
Fr. Chad S. Green
Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church
Sammamish, Washington
12 February 2023

Sirach 15:15-20
Psalm 119
1 Corinthians 2:6-10
(Matthew 11:25) Matthew 5:17-37

The Commandments Help Us on Our Trajectory to Heaven

This Sunday, we continue with Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*—perhaps the greatest and most well-known sermon the world has ever heard. For these new disciples that were just beginning to follow and learn from Jesus, this *Sermon* turned the world that they knew upside down and inside out. Going back a couple weeks to *The Beatitudes*. Continuing last week with *The Similes of Salt and Light*. This week's portion of the *Sermon* is Jesus' *Teaching About the Law*. The challenge for us as disciples today is: can we take Jesus' words seriously.¹ Do His words still apply to us today? Can His words still turn our world upside down and inside? Today's Gospel gives us another opportunity to reflect on that question and assess how we're doing at taking Jesus' words and teachings seriously.

+++

Before we look at the Gospel, I'd like us to first lay some groundwork with the First Reading, from the Book of Sirach. Sirach is one of the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament, written by a wise and experienced sage—or observer of life—who lived in Jerusalem in the early part of the 2nd century B.C.

The verse I'd actually like us to begin with is one that we didn't hear in the First Reading. It's the verse just before the First Reading begins. It contains something very important for us to take note of. Verse 14 says this:

God in the beginning created human beings
and made them subject to their own free choice.²

We have been given by God the gift of free will. Then the First Reading begins with the next verse, Verse 15:

If you choose, you can keep the commandments,
[and if you do] they will save you.³

+++

Now, onto today's Gospel. We hear Jesus use a series of phrases that are structured with these words:

"You have heard that it was said...
But I say to you..."

On the surface, this phrasing makes it seem like Jesus might be changing the Law in some way. However, if we listen closely, that's *not* the case, at all. Jesus speaks to us very clearly: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."⁴

In any way that Jesus might be viewed as some kind of revolutionary in His time—turning the world upside down and inside out, so to speak. What we see in today's Gospel is that the revolution Jesus has in mind is to turn the course of the world back on a certain trajectory. Both a certain trajectory for the world and human history, as well as a certain trajectory for each one of us personally.

The trajectory can be described as "making our way back to God." We were made with free choice—the gift of free will. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, abused that gift by turning away from God. Yet God, in His infinite love and mercy, did not abandon us when we turned away from Him. In all the ways that we as a human family have strayed from God. In any way that any of us personally has strayed from God. Jesus came into our world to seek us. To rescue us. To redeem us. And to show us the way back.⁵

+++

One of the important ways that Jesus shows us the way to Heaven is by teaching us. That's what makes us *disciples*—by *learning* from Jesus. (If we ever stop learning, then we cease being a *disciple*.) In today's Gospel, Jesus is teaching us that the Commandments are the boundaries that keep us safe on the way. It's when we choose to ignore God's Commandments that we put ourselves in danger of becoming enslaved to sin and evil, which diminishes our freedom.

This is a good time to clarify what *freedom* is. We sometimes think of freedom as meaning: "I can do whatever I want." However, that is *not* freedom. Freedom is the ability to choose the good. When God made us with free choice, He made us with the ability to choose the good. When we abuse that freedom. The more frequently we don't choose the good. Then we damage and diminish our ability to choose the good. To truly be free. To choose the way to Heaven. And to choose life.

In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches us that following the Commandments is not the destination. Following the Commandments is what keeps us on the path. On the trajectory towards Heaven. Broadly, we can see three stages on this trajectory⁶:

- First, conversion is turning back to God. Correcting the trajectory away from sin and death, back toward God and life.
- Second, beginning to make progress toward God is living a life of following the Commandments. This helps us get better and better at choosing the good. And thus, growing in freedom.
- Third, it's not enough to avoid sin outwardly. We must allow our whole being to be purified, body, soul, mind, and heart. To become more and more like God. And to grow in union with God.

So, as Jesus teaches us in *The Sermon on the Mount*—words that *are* still relevant for us today—it's not enough to avoid killing another person. That's the external action. We must continue to grow in holiness in our minds and hearts, as well. Killing begins by having an

angry thought and allowing it to fester and grow until it becomes any violent act or words.

Therefore, we must stay far away from things that stoke or inflame anger within us.

And, it's not enough to avoid adultery. That's the external action. We must continue to grow in purity in our minds and hearts, as well. Adultery begins by having a lustful thought and allowing it to fester and grow until it becomes any lustful act or words. Therefore, we must stay far away from things that stoke or inflame lust within us.

+++

Perhaps it's helpful to imagine the Commandments as the fence of a sheepfold. Jesus doesn't want us to get close to that fence. Every step we take toward the fence is another step closer to the possibility that—in a moment of weakness or confusion—we might jump over the fence. Every step we take toward the fence is another step closer to the possibility that a wolf could reach through the fence and snatch us. The fence (the Commandments) are a boundary we shouldn't cross. However, Jesus is teaching us that we don't need to come close to the boundary. We can stay where it's safer, near Him, in the center of the sheepfold.

That's what today's Gospel is about. Staying safely in the center of the sheepfold. But, we always have to keep in mind something that is so important and central to Jesus' mission in our world. When we do stray; when we do hop over the fence—and all of us have in some way—we are reminded that our Good Shepherd does not abandon us.⁷ He will go to any length to find us, rescue us, and bring us back to the Father's House.⁸ No matter how far we stray, we're never outside of Jesus' mercy and His pursuit of each one of us.⁹

+++

We'll begin Lent in ten days. Lent is a good time to assess how I'm doing at staying away from the danger of sin. What kinds of things do I listen to, watch, or read? What kind of

video games do I play? It's not enough to avoid killing someone. We must also avoid taking in hateful or violent words and images that cause us to be angry or have hateful thoughts—which can lead to something worse.

It's not enough to avoid adultery. We must also avoid taking in images, music lyrics, and other content that is suggestive, explicit, immodest, or vulgar that can cause us to have lustful thoughts, images, or ideas—which can lead to something worse.

Can we work on cutting out media which seems to be primarily saturated with anger and lust? That might be something good to give up for Lent. It is so prevalent that we may not be aware that we're taking in this content. Or, we may not think it's possible to avoid it. Can you imagine life without taking these things in on a regular basis? Would this turn your world upside down and inside out to cut these media out of your life?

Lent is a great time to try it out. To see if you notice a difference. To see if you have more time and space for God and growing in holiness. It's only forty days—it's worth a try!

We are made with free choice. Freedom means being able to choose the good. Jesus teaches us and encourages us to be watchful, and to not do or even expose ourselves to anything that leads us into or brings us another step closer to sin. To anything that leads us away from Him and off of the trajectory He shows us on the way to Heaven.

¹ Adrien Nocent, OSB, "Fourth Sunday: God Chooses the Poor" in *The Liturgical Year: Volume Three: Sundays Two to Thirty-Four in Ordinary Time* (tr. By Matthew J. O'Connell) (2013) p. 72:

"The gospel preaches a world turned inside out. This is not to say it claims poverty to be something good or that God's blessing cannot be manifested in the gifts of material things. The gospel does, however, foresee that it is difficult to keep our hearts free in the midst of earthly possessions. That is the point of the beatitudes...

...

Within the total context provided by the readings of the Sunday, the thematic beatitudes are poverty of spirit, meekness, mourning, hunger and thirst, and persecution—in short, everything that represents weakness, everything the world looks down its nose at and has trouble taking seriously."

² Sirach 15:14

³ Sirach 15:15

⁴ Matthew 5:17

⁵ John 14:6

⁶ These three stages are also known as the Purgative, Illuminative, and Unitive States or Ways.

See: Arthur Devine, “State or Way (Purgative, Illuminative, Unitive)” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1912)
(<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14254a.htm><https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14254a.htm>)

⁷ John 10:11, 14

⁸ John 14:3

⁹ Luke 15:1-7