

Sermon on February 16, 2020

By Jane McBride

This week's Gospel passage could be interpreted as Jesus removing any possibility of moral high ground from those who might be inclined to claim it. We know that, among those who followed Jesus from place to place, were people who disapproved of him, who were out to try and trick him, to find reasons to dismiss him or worse, reasons to get him into trouble. There was an uneasy pact between the Jewish community and the Roman authorities. The Jews were mostly left in peace as long as they kept their heads down. Jesus, however, has his head high up, right above the parapet, and the Pharisees and teachers of the law are rightly concerned that he is drawing unwelcome attention their way. But they're not just concerned about Jewish-Roman relations, they're concerned about someone who appears to be drawing support and influence away from them. The teachers of the law, like many in today's society, love the moral high ground. But Jesus says - well you might be thinking, at least I haven't murdered anyone, at least I haven't committed adultery - but that doesn't get you off the hook with God. To live well and righteously you need to do more than 'not murder', 'not commit adultery' - you need not only to control your actions, but also your thoughts. And who among us has never had an angry or bitter thought, who among us has never felt desire or attraction in directions that we know are not ours to go in. So Jesus calls those who want to follow him not just 'to not do certain things' but actively to act against those things by doing other things, by sending our thoughts in other directions, actively ignoring the parts of ourselves that lead us into hate and lust.

When I speak with the religious Sisters who are the subject of my research about the promises they have made, the vows they have taken, they have three: poverty, chastity and obedience (for male religious the vows are poverty, celibacy and obedience...) and they talk about these vows as signifying not a renouncing or a giving up but a living differently, in a different spirit. They talk about the spirit and not the letter of the promises as Jesus here talks about the spirit and not the letter of the law: for instance, the spirit of a vow of poverty is about releasing yourself from any desire to possess things or to acquire money or stuff...and when I asked about the spirit of a vow of chastity - well that proved trickier to define but basically it is a reordering of relationships, a spirit of respect in our interpersonal dealings, integrity in interactions with others - or as one of the Sisters said - basically we promise only to fall in love with Jesus...

What Jesus is doing is announcing a new way of being, a new path to walk where you can't just fold your arms and say - I'm fine, I don't kill people and I don't sleep around. When people look at the followers of Jesus they are supposed to see an alternative to the cruel Roman Empire. The Ten Commandments aren't achieving this aim in Jesus' opinion. The commandment against murder is not stopping people from being violent in their language and accusations, in their infighting and nastiness - and who wants to belong to a group like that?

Similarly the commandment against adultery in a patriarchal society was not stopping men exploiting women, subjugating them, dominating them. Women were and still are routinely objectified, judged, undermined, and underestimated. Jesus sees that a different kind of male-female interaction is called for. Where many saw women as property which men could covet, Jesus teaches an extension of the commandment which gives women dignity, which warns about the dangers of a culture of male privilege.

In the first century, when women could be divorced for crazy reasons, including burning bread, Jesus offers a new way where women are allowed to be disciples.

And although we only hear the man's view in the commandments, the new man that Jesus represents shows us that love not power is the new order.

If we are to be the salt and light that Jesus called us in last week's Gospel we need to understand that how we live during the week is important, how we relate to others, with kindness or with violence is our responsibility and will affect how those around us view not just us but also our faith community.

The person that we choose to be in the world reflects back on those we are connected to, those we are in relationship with. Being a member of a community like this one brings with it a commitment to reflect the values of the community in how we live and how we speak.

The upside of the responsibility that being part of a community brings is that we are not alone. Being disciples of Jesus is a community and not an individualistic matter - we need one another if we are to live non-violently in our world today.

So goodbye moral highground and hello the path, the way of God. We may not commit murder but sometimes we are good at "stabbing someone in the back" or ruining their reputation. We may not commit adultery, but sometimes our relationships with work, sports, or even the internet, can take priority over our loved ones.

The call to a new way of living will be repeated throughout Jesus' teaching and illustrated in many ways. As we recalled throughout Advent and Christmastide, God is not just the 'with me, God' - God in Jesus is Emmanuel - 'with us God'. God is in this with us and we are all in this with one another. We do not live and speak in a vacuum but for and in relationship and community. Let's live out that message of non-violence and respect for those we encounter in the week ahead.