

## Freedom

Many folks say that the Sermon on the Mount is like the Constitution of the Church.

You know it: blessed are the poor, the mourning, the hungry.

Love your enemy, pray for your persecutors, walk the extra mile.

The Sermon on the Mount, like a Constitution, sets out how we are to live with one another: with compassion and mercy and kindness being the guiding lights.

But how do we get there?

It's one thing to give lip service to loving one's enemies, it's something else entirely to do it, day in and day out.

Perhaps that's why we have today's very difficult gospel lesson.

If the Sermon on the Mount is like the Constitution, today's gospel is more like a Declaration of Independence.

Before we can get to the place of living out the ideals of the Sermon on the Mount, we need to be on the road to a deep and profound change of character.

We need to declare our independence from the things that keep us tied up, afraid or angry.

Things like nationalism and love of power, fame and money.

Things like greed and self-pity, arrogance and distrust.

Today, Jesus introduces us to that road to independence.

It's a road that's quite strange, even alien; perhaps especially so for lifelong Christians.

That's because we're so good at redefining who and what it is to be a Christian.

Some say "accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, and you're in the club!"

Others say, "be baptized, and you're in the club!"

And while there is some truth in those invitations, they are the barest beginnings into this new way of life.

Baby steps in what is actually at the heart of it all: a lifetime dedicated to transformation, to metanoia, to entering into the larger mind of God.

In order to really get this new way of living, we need to face ourselves: with honest, fearless, even brutal, honesty.

Jesus starts at the place where most of us stop: with our fears.

What will happen if I dive deeply into my defects of character?

What will happen if I stand up for the weak, the stranger, the outcast?

And Jesus replies: you'll find freedom — and enemies!

Joy — and pushback!

Love — and yes — resentment.

But freedom makes it worth the effort!

Freedom from old demons, old tapes, old ways of doing things that only lead to destruction and pain.

Freedom from the fear of rejection.

Because rejection by others no longer carries the same sting.

Because you suddenly know, deep in your bones: you're accepted by God.

Jesus recognizes that we are all of us, almost by instinct, drawn to devote ourselves to things that are too small to contain who we truly are.

For some, it's love of country.

For others, it's love of race or creed or color.

For many, it's love of family.

But no matter to which of these we give our devotion, it isn't enough.

Which is why our reading ends with that 2 x 4 hitting us between the eyes.

With Jesus insisting he's not bringing peace but division — between children and parents, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives.

How Jesus insists that we need to love him more than those most intimately connected with us.

And I can guarantee you that more than one person has wondered how such language ever made it into the Bible, much less coming from the lips of Jesus!

Some sneeringly argue that Jesus is like an insecure schoolboy, demanding the love of others.

But that doesn't even skim the surface of what he's saying.

And if we want to follow Jesus, we, like him, need to go deep.

And when we do, we discover that what Jesus is getting at in his harsh observation about our family life is, perspective.

Meaning, we get into trouble when we ask any human relationship to bear too much weight; weight that only the ultimate, only the divine, can carry.

You've heard it said a million times: racists aren't born, they're taught.

And where does the teaching happen?

In the family!

The same is true for physical or mental abusers.

It's all learned behavior.

Learned in the context of our most intimate relationships.

Even if your family escapes these extremes, we are all of us beset with bigotries and judgments and a smallness that is, even in the best of families, passed down through the generations.

I heard an interview the other day with a singer who was given up at birth to adoptive parents, who, it turns out, left a lot to be desired.

Dad was an active alcoholic.

Mom had serious psychological issues.

This woman looked for salvation in romantic love, a place many of us go to, hoping for solace and safety.

But after a series of failed marriages, she's finally learning that romantic love isn't the answer to her deepest needs.

She's coming to see that for as long as she can remember, she's felt like a plug, in search of a socket.

For the longest time, she kept trying to make romantic love, the love that, she now understands, really describes, at best, the first 6 months of any relationship — she kept trying to make that the key to her salvation.

At 52, she's finally learning that love is an inside out job.

And it really matters that the inside is hooked in tightly to the One who holds all things together.

Jesus, in his harsh words this morning, is driving that point home.

He's asking us to pay close attention to what we seek from each other.

Why?

Because we none of us can be, completely, the socket for anyone's plug.

We are creatures made in the image and likeness of God.

And our relationships with each other, if lived with an understanding of their limits, can be and often are deeply fulfilling, deeply enriching.

Yet, at the end of the day, we each of us have an even deeper longing, an even deeper need, that only the love of God can fill.

That perspective, I think, is what Jesus is getting at as he cautions us to keep our priorities straight.

If we see our family and friends as the be all and end all of our relationships, we will welcome only them, and those who look, talk or act like them.

But if the true ground of all of our relationships is God, if God is the source of the love that flows through us and to each other, then all of a sudden a whole new world begins to open up.

Jesus peels away the veil that keeps us from seeing this new world by inviting us to move past our fears, past our small minded focus on immediate relationships, and to gaze at the wonders of creation unfolding before us, in all of her magnificent splendor.

Today, in no uncertain terms, Jesus reminds us that our faith is not membership in a club, nor is it a passing nod to this or that dogma.

Our faith invites us, as fallen and broken people, into a life- changing journey of transformation.

People who are willing to die to all that seems sane, sensible and safe.

A people who discover that death, if we embrace it, takes us up and out of ourselves, opening wide for us a translucent world, filled with wonder and awe.

If only we will try.

For as the poet says:

Unless the eye catch fire,  
God will not be seen.  
Unless the ear catch fire,  
God will not be heard.  
Unless the tongue catch fire,  
God will not be named.  
Unless the heart catch fire,  
God will not be loved.  
Unless the mind catch fire,  
God will not be known.  
-Blake

Maybe that's why Jesus is so tough on us today.

Without a breaking open, joy passes us by.

But with a breaking open, joy rains down, drenching us all with laughter.

And peace.

And tears.

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