GRACE and HOLY TRINITY, RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

February 13, 2011

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3: 1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

I bring you greetings from Virginia Theological Seminary—the venerable institution that helped to shape Bo and Lauren—and a number of clergy who have served Grace and Holy Trinity. When I read the Gospel today, I understood completely why a guest preacher was sought. It is a Gospel concerning anger, adultery, lust, divorce and swearing. In the old lectionary, the verses about divorce were omitted. That was quite nice. I know that this Gospel has not appeared on a Sunday since 1999—but with Easter so late this year we have now heard it read in our midst this morning. I always remember Jimmy Carter when I hear this Gospel because of his confession while President about lusting in his heart. It was a rather stupid confession.

A few years ago in my home state of South Carolina, my extended family was focused on the Governor who just left office. You may remember: First he was reported missing on the Appalachian Trail. Then it was discovered that he was with his mistress in Argentina. Married with four sons, this was for Mark Sanford being in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong person. My father-in-law who was 88 at the time was following the sordid tale very closely. I called him to ask the latest. He simply said: the Governor needs to find a girlfriend closer to home.

Now his response points up the utter humanity of us all. The disciples of our Lord and the fledgling Church they were serving had more than a little trouble with anger and lust, divorce and swearing, the law and grace, and the new covenant which Jesus was framing. Before this difficult text, Matthew makes sure that his readers know that Jesus did not come “to abolish the law or the prophets” but rather to fulfill Moses’ law and the prophecies of Israel. Matthew records that breaking the commandments is serious business. The writer of the Gospel pleads for a “righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.”

Thankfully, Matthew says that those who break one of the least of the commandments will be “called least in the kingdom of heaven.” It sounds like Jesus is saying that sinners will make it into the kingdom! And “whoever does the commandments and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of Heaven.” So, let’s begin with that good news: Even if you break one of the commandments you make it into the kingdom of Heaven. You may be least—but you are still there! God’s grace meets God’s law and grace pulls us into the kingdom. This, however, is not an invitation to sin boldly so that grace may abound.

We must hear three things this morning: a lovely three point sermon, if you will, on the eve of Valentine’s Day! First, Jesus ultimately wants us to hear that his kingdom is not founded on rules, regulations, commandments and laws. Jesus calls us to repentance and a new way of being. Jesus calls for metanoia: a turning around; a facing in a new direction; a new heart. Jesus knew from his own disciples that keeping the law was an impossible vocation. So, Jesus opens up a new possibility, a new and lasting forgiveness.
Second: There is wisdom in what Jesus offers in these hard words. “Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court.” “It is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.” Put another way: I am giving you a way to avoid hell. On divorce, Jesus does not let us off the hook—but he does not consign those caught in the ache of divorce to the lowest rung of Dante’s Inferno. “Do not swear at all.” In particular, “do not swear by your head—for you cannot make one hair white or black.” Jesus wisely tells his followers of their limits, of their frailty, of their flaws—fallible creatures we all are.

Rowan Williams, the present Archbishop of Canterbury, says in a sermon that “wisdom is the celebration of order and the cry of protest at what is without order.” Jesus is God’s wisdom as he delivers the news that anger, adultery, lust, divorce and swearing are living without order in our lives. God’s order requires a different way of being, a new way of being. Wisdom joined to metanoia invites us to mirror God—and to find in God self-sharing, self-losing care and compassion. Wisdom points us away from our brokenness to God’s wholeness.

Third and finally: Yes, Jesus is about a new kingdom and one not of this world. Jesus provides a way to wisdom and to order in our lives. Jesus calls us to be perfect—but goes to the cross because he knows it is not possible. Our wisdom will not be enough. Jesus’ kingdom will always be beyond us—if we grasp for it out of our own righteousness.

So, today’s difficult Gospel demands that we get it right—for we so often get it wrong. The dour Welsh poet, R. S. Thomas, opines:

_Instead of the altar the pulpit. Instead of the bread the fraction of the language. And God a shadow of himself on a blank wall. Their prayers are a passing of hands over their brows as though in an effort to wipe sin off. Their buildings are in praise of concrete and macadam. Frowning upon divorce, they divorce art and religion. Ah, if one flower had been allowed to grow between the wall and the railings as sacrament of renewal. Instead two cypresses all there, emaciated as the bodies of the thieves upon Calvary but with no Savior between them._

Yes, we need an altar more than a pulpit. We need bread more than language. We need forgiveness as our certainty more than concrete. We must frown about the big divorces in all of us, rather than the small divorces between us. We cannot live if we do not look for one flower that is for us the sacrament of renewal. We must not focus on our own brokenness full of anger, adultery, lust, divorce and swearing. We must focus on the Saviour who hangs on a cross for us and lives beyond the grave—and leads us even now on a “journey as long as that of the wise men to the cradle.”

This morning think of yourself not as an angry man or angry woman; do not think of yourself as one who lusts; refrain from labeling yourself an adulterer; don’t focus on being a divorced person or one who swears. Rather, come to this altar as the complex, wonderfully made person you are. Leave this place forgiven and loved.

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