

February 16: 6th Sunday after Epiphany

Year A: 1 Corinthians 3.1-9; Psalm 119.1-8; Matthew 5.21-37

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This is our third week of working through the Sermon on the Mount. Two weeks ago we heard Jesus giving gentle reassurance to people who felt abandoned and forlorn, assuring them that they were blessed. Last week, we heard him encouraging the same crowd to take heart and let their light shine.

Today, we got to the hard part. The message here was: it's not enough to refrain from committing sin; you're guilty if you even think about it! And it goes on for quite a few more verses, until verse 48, in which Jesus sums it all up by saying "Be perfect, therefore." Be perfect, he said. Be perfect! Are we supposed to take that literally?

Many people do take those words literally, and they tend to go off in one of two wrong directions. Some people decide that, if we are expected to be perfect, and we know we're can't possibly manage that, then we might as well give up and just do whatever we like because we're going to hell anyway. If 'perfect' is the only thing that will ever be good enough, we've all already blown that, so we might as well give up all hope.

The other way to go wrong – and there are plenty of people who've gone this way as well – is to think that it doesn't matter what we do, because we're going to be forgiven anyway. God is the ultimate in dotting parents and won't hold anything against us, especially if we come up with a really good excuse, and pull a sorry face. (As if we can fool God, who knows us better than we know ourselves!)

Both of these misguided notions ignore the fact that doing what is wrong has other consequences or repercussions. The reasoning goes that 'wrong' is only a religious idea anyway, and you can throw it out when you reject the religion. That frees you up to ignore the harm you might be doing to others, or to yourself.

And both of these misguided notions offer comfort to themselves with statements like "I'm only human," or "I'm no worse than anyone else." Now, that might well be true, but "No worse than anyone else" is not the standard we were set. "Perfect" may be impossible, but it **IS** the standard that we are set. What else would we expect? God's standard is hardly going to be "Give it a shot, and give up if it's hard." Nor is it going to be "Do what you can manage, but don't put yourself out." God doesn't set low standards, nor does God accept lame excuses.

Thinking of lame excuses always reminds of Geraldine Jones. (You remember her - Flip Wilson in a wig and a mini-skirt.) Geraldine always made the same excuse when she did something wrong, "De devil made me do it!" What a neat way to shirk responsibility and still sound pious! "Don't blame me. Blame the devil." Nice try!

The balancing act between trying to be perfect and finding excuses for everything we do wrong, is a tough one. But it is inevitable. All of us, all the time, struggle to find a balance between excusing ourselves for our shortcomings and failures, and trying to fix them.

In a delightful little book called *Seriously, Life is a Laughing Matter*, Tom Mullen suggests that this balancing act is so difficult because just thinking about it messes it up. Perfection, he says, is like humility: if you don't think about it at all, you might be doing quite well; if you spend a lot of time thinking about it, you definitely aren't.

C.S. Lewis<sup>1</sup>, as always, had another angle on the balance between excusing our failures and fixing ourselves: it reminded him of toothache. As a child, he knew that if he told his mother that he had toothache, she would give him an aspirin to make the pain go away. But she would also take him to the dentist. He wanted the pain to go away, but he didn't want a permanent solution. All too often, Lewis says, we avoid facing up to things until they are so bad that we can't ignore them any longer, and then we just want God to give us the aspirin without making us go to the dentist. We want to be excused; we want to be forgiven; but we don't want to do the work of fixing ourselves.

And when it comes to fixing ourselves, it's very discouraging to read today's gospel and hear Jesus say that even thinking about breaking a commandment is as bad as actually breaking it. As if perfection wasn't already hard enough, now we're in trouble just for thinking imperfect thoughts! What incentive is there for resisting temptation, if it's already too late just because we were tempted?

Well, maybe we need to look for another way of understanding what Jesus is saying. Perhaps he is saying that if you don't resist those bad thoughts when they first begin, they can easily escalate into bad deeds, and then into worse deeds. You may not consider yourself likely to commit murder in the normal run of things, but if you are angry with someone, and you let that

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<sup>1</sup> In *Mere Christianity*.

anger fester and grow, you might move on to a confrontation. And that confrontation might turn nasty, and move on to name-calling. And that kind of emotional violence is only a short step away from physical violence. And then things can really get out of control, and you could end up doing something you never meant to do, and never thought you would do.

Once you've started down a wrong path, it gets harder and harder to stop. Perhaps that's what Jesus is talking about here, when he talks about going to hell. The word here is "Gehenna", which is Greek for the Hebrew "Hinnom." Hinnom was the garbage dump outside of Jerusalem. It was permanently on fire, and not at all a nice place to go, but it makes a good metaphor for a very unpleasant destination. It doesn't mean the eternal, and inescapable, damnation that we attach to the word 'hell.'

Going to Gehenna is more like what we mean by "going to hell on a handcart." The sort of thing that happens when things get out of hand.....; when one mistake leads to another.....; when we've started down a slippery slope, and we're heading to a destination we never intended.

The warning here is that the first step on such a path can often seem really trivial.

\* "If you are angry with someone" and you hang onto that anger, .... it's probably not going to end well.

\*"If you insult someone" .... that's probably not going to end well either.

But someone who is 'perfect' would never take that first step, now would they? Well, perhaps we need to take a closer look at that word too. The word that is usually translated as 'perfect' can mean 'complete' or 'having reached maturity.' In modern English, it means something closer to 'grown up.'

If we put both of those ideas together, then perhaps we can understand today's gospel as being precisely the kind of advice a good parent would give.

Whenever we feel drawn into conflict.....,

    whenever we get angry or petulant.....,

        whenever we are tempted to do something we know is wrong.....,

            whenever we feel like retaliating or getting even.....

And that advice is "Show some restraint and behave like a responsible grown-up!"

And surely we can at least try to do that? Behaving like responsible adults who are trying hard

to live up to God's standard, and avoiding the kinds of behaviour that set our feet on the slippery slope, is a lot less dramatic than plucking your eye out or cutting your hand off, but if those are intended as metaphors for deliberately choosing to steer ourselves away from the things that get us into trouble, it's the same thing.

Yes, it's a battle. Perfect is a pretty tough standard, but we need to struggle towards that all our lives. The best we can hope for at the end is that we will be able to say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

Or, in the beautiful words of the BCP, we can hope to say that "We have so passed through things temporal that we have lost not the things eternal." Amen.