

Courage to Change -- Epiphany6A

Today we continue our consideration of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. As ever, Jesus challenges and expands traditional views about how we can align ourselves with the goodness of God. Last week, the final sentence of the Gospel reading flashed by, and there was a little ripple of, 'hang on a second' in more minds than mine. Jesus said, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Hang on a second, "exceeds that of the so-called leadership?"

And now today, his subsequent remarks confirm it – more is required of us as followers of Jesus than we see modeled by many a self-styled paragon of virtue. Jesus reaches back into the wisdom of the ages – the words of the prophets -- to give us the deeper foundational nourishment necessary for transforming the world. "If you choose, you can keep the commandments," says ben Sirach, "To act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. God has placed before you fire and water, life and death; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose, for great is the wisdom of the Lord. God has not commanded anyone to be wicked, and has not given anyone permission to sin." Because we have been given free will, the ability to choose, God has given us permission to sin, if we will. The episode in the Garden of Eden with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and

Evil is our picturesque way of acknowledging that fact and its implications. We don't have access to immortality, and never will. But being in the likeness of God does include having to make choices.

The story is that our founding parents were punished for stealing the fruit of that tree, but really, God gave us the fruit by putting it there. She knew we would eat it. We have the primal desire to eat, and the capacity to recognize good and evil as part of our consciousness. But the competence only comes with experience. Being human means having to choose. Eve and Adam's experience is supposed to give the rest of us the competence to choose wisely. "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord without sinning." But our proclivity is to try to skew the system in our own favor. We tend to tell ourselves that there is a way around truth, even though, deep-down, we know other-wise.

"O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes! Then I shall not be put to shame," prays the psalmist. We long to have chosen well, but we're not always so good at choosing well. It's not so much transgression we want to avoid, but the public shaming that comes from getting caught and knowing we chose wrongly. Our true choices are inner ones, because truly shame is an inside job. We can transgress all day, say and do whatever we like to whomever we like, but if we aren't suffering any losses and we don't feel badly about

it, where is the downside? Which is why Jesus won't be satisfied with a discussion of outer behavior; why he insists that we concern ourselves with our inner lives.

All outer behavior begins with inner behavior. Jesus' examples of inner sin in today's gospel are about personal relationships in the smallest communities – made up of the people we live and trade with every day -- our families and nearest neighbors. If there is to be justice, mercy and humility in world affairs, it has to begin with just, merciful and humble personal relationships. Deeper still, when there is conflict in one's very self, in that community of voices, memories and instincts each of us lives within our own selves the same principles have to apply. God knows there can be plenty of conflict right here in Spaceship Me. There must be justice, mercy, humility in our innermost dealings if we want true freedom in making good choices about outer ones.

The great psychologist Carl Jung insisted that acceptance of self is the essence of peace. He wrote: "That I feed the hungry, forgive an insult, love my enemy, are all great virtues. But if I discover that the poorest, the most impudent, the greatest enemy is within me, and I stand in need of the alms of my own kindness, what then? Neurosis is the state of being at war with oneself, and everything that mitigates that state serves to heal the patient.

Jesus is not trying to alarm us, or hold us to some impossible standard. God wants us to succeed, not be driven to our knees in pain and failure. She knows the disastrous consequences of recognizing mistakes only after they've been made. Thus Kierkegaard's famous pickle: "Life can only be understood backward, but we have to live it forward." Jesus is just pointing out that all of it begins with the inner atmosphere in which our choices are made. What is the neighborhood like between my ears? Is there the littering trash of envy and greed blowing around in the streets? How's my drainage system working? Backed up with clumps and tangles of woulda, coulda, shoulda weed? Or can I get a drink at the cool fountains of conversation with old friends of trusted memory and new ones full of hope? Can I think my way freely down the lane of ingenuous intention toward my day's enterprise? What do we hold onto that paralyzes us?

Jesus is not chiding or admonishing us to be superhuman. He simply wants us to come to terms with our own humanity. He wants us to be aware that the depths of our troubles are never unreachable by the possibility of healing love. He wants us to be, as one man wrote, as deeply conservative in preserving our faith as we are radical in applying it, just as true leaders are conservative with resources but compassionate with people. Jesus wants us to know and care for ourselves more thoughtfully, in order to be available for each other, in order to be well.

Cynthia Bourgeault makes a particularly lovely observation about faith and physicality. It's about the way Jesus will support us if we give ourselves to the kind of deep and difficult, but ultimately joyful work he is suggesting today. "All I ever learned about faith," she claims, "I learned as a child." When we learn to ride a bike, there is a moment when we let go of the ground and our Mom or Dad let go of the bike, and we feel the balance – riding! Or in the water -- if you are fortunate enough to have a good teacher -- there is a moment in when you stop struggling and let your legs hang down and just float – safely and by yourself – knowing strong hands are ready to support you if you begin to sink...but you don't... you are swimming! That is how faith works, the kind that will prevail in all our relationships, from the inside job to the greater good: by letting go of the anger, pain and behaviors that only work to destroy us and our loves and making new choices that we will never be ashamed of; choices that will make us say, "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."