

In the Name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sunday, February 13, 2011 – The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37
Preached by Fr. D.W. Matthews, *Priest and Rector*

Valentine's Day evokes the image of those little candy hearts we used to hand out in elementary school that were supposed to reveal what was in your heart to someone else. They had messages on them like "Be Mine," "Yours Forever," "True Love," "Hugs and Kisses" and "Ever After." The logos now include "Text Me" and "E mail me." During the past few weeks you can't have gone into any store without seeing hearts, flowers, and chocolates. That may be partly why, when I read this very hard and challenging text from Saint Matthew's Gospel about anger, adultery, the careless severing of marital bonds, and frivolous oaths, I think about hearts.



I think it's deeper than that though. I believe that Jesus' teachings in the Gospels about matters of the heart – *lev* in Hebrew and *kardia* in Greek – form the framework within we are to read these verses. In the screenplay of the Gospels, such teaching scenes usually occur when the Pharisees are on stage with Him, primed for conflict. In response to the Scribe who seeks to test Him, our Lord affirms that the heart of all the Torah (a collation of Dt. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18) is loving the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and our neighbor as we love ourselves (Lk. 10:27).

Last Sunday, when the disciples express concern that Jesus has offended the Pharisees with His critique of their ritual purity laws (Mt. 15:12), He asks them, "*Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart comes evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile*" (Mt. 15:17-8; Mk. 7:15). In criticizing the quest for material wealth, Jesus says that "*where our treasure is, there will our heart be also*" (Mt. 6:21 and Lk. 12:34).



In painting a picture of the life pleasing to God, Jesus offers this Beatitude: "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*" (Mt. 5:8). It is essential that we see here that our Lord is standing in these teachings on the foundation of prior teachings from Hebrew Scriptures about the heart as the inner source of outer actions, subject to the good or evil influence of imagination. He's asking, "*What is in your heart?*"

When I was growing up, my dad, who was quite the humorist at times, used to ask us when we were disagreeing with something he had said or asked us to do: "*Are you contradicting me?*" It took me a while to realize I was being set up. Of course, there is no right answer to this question. If you say no, you were contradicting him. If you say yes, you were being insubordinate. I believe something similar is going on here in this Gospel. Here Jesus is saying "no" and Jesus is saying "yes" – both at the same time. "No, I'm not contradicting

the heart and spirit of Torah.” “Yes, I am challenging interpretations of the law that are not consistent with its heart: challenging anything but the whole-hearted love of God and neighbor.” **(This is the whole point of this passage in fact: Jesus has come to fulfill, not abolish the law and the prophets.)**

All of these topics – anger, adultery, the careless severing of marital bonds, and frivolous oaths – are centered in our own self-awareness and choices. Jesus reminds us that when we point a finger we have three pointing back at us. In other words, we can’t be faithful to God while seeking to destroy another soul or wishing anyone harm. In each of these issues, our Lord acknowledges they may happen, however He calls His followers to a “higher standard” of faithfulness and living – a different way of behaving from the world around us. Each of these topics is an entire sermon in itself (perhaps a few, in fact), so this morning my attempt will be to focus on what I believe are Jesus’ hardest words in this Gospel – **His words regarding divorce and anger.**



Divorce is perhaps the hardest topic we address in this Gospel, especially in our modern culture. What we need to learn, however, is that the law of Moses (Dt. 24:1) specified a divorce process in which a man, if he found something objectionable about his wife, could write a certificate of divorce and send her out of the house. Remember, this is a time when women were property and it is a fact we cannot change. Yet, although the law privileged the man, the Hebrews uniquely protected the woman from a charge of adultery by supplying her with a certificate of divorce so she could remarry. The powerful husband could “dispose” of his property, his wife, but at least she was under the protection of the certificate.

Jesus does not like what is in the heart of this divorce law. He clearly speaks to forbid divorce except on grounds of “unchastity” (Mt. 5:32) – a Greek word *porneia* – which refers to any form of sexual aberration, most likely adultery or incest. Jesus allows no room for divorce in a culture in which divorce is an assault on the value of a person, an abuse of power, or a trivializing of faithful commitments. It is the careless or even casual breaking of what should be the most faithful relationship which He condemns without hesitation.

This is hard for many of us to hear, therefore knowing how to receive Jesus' words on divorce today is extremely difficult. We must understand that in the first-century world divorce meant more what we would call “abandonment.” Someone simply walked out or threw the woman out. Fortunately, abandonment has been made illegal in many cultures. This is a positive impact of our Lord prolonged teachings of the Sermon on the Mount on divorce.

Yet, in my pastoral work with people, I have often seen these verses function to make women feel guilty for leaving abusive marriages or for having been left by their husbands. Matthew 5:31-32 has been used by some portions of the church to infuse these women with perpetual guilt over their divorced status and to paralyze them from making new



commitments. This, in my opinion, is the seriously negative impact we can see of this teaching.

The truth is that the most important need is to discern what lies at the heart of Jesus' words, just as Jesus discerned what lay at the heart of the Mosaic law. **Marriage is intended to be a communion between two people that expresses, in their mutual fidelity, the faithfulness of God. It is intended to be a place of safety, nurture, and honor for person.** In Jesus' day, the customs and practices of divorce were a direct assault on those values and we, too, must be cautious of our own approaches to the same. Indeed, there are times when some relationships are well beyond repair, yet God's grace and faithful wisdom is always needed in applying our Lord's words for today in those instances when exiting an untenable, abusive, loveless relationship is more in keeping with the heart of the law than staying in it.



The second most challenging issue I wish to address this morning is that of anger. As we all know, murder is prohibited in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:13; Dt. 5:17). The Pentateuch states that the one who commits murder will be put to death (Ex. 21:12; Lev. 24:17). Jesus adds to this traditional teaching by saying that those who direct anger toward another and speak insulting words should, or will, suffer punishment. In other words, murder begins as a matter of the heart and anger is the source of murder, so it must thus be uprooted.

Now clearly some interpreters wish to make this statement less absolute, to soften it to allow for righteous anger. After all, they say, the Hebrew Bible seems to make room for justified anger, such as in Psalm 4 where it is said, "Be angry but sin not" (v. 4). Scriptural figures become angry as we can see with Moses in the Exodus (32:19) or the Prophet Jeremiah (6:11). In fact, it is said in these Scriptures that God is angry at times (i.e., Ex. 4:14).

But at the same time that the Hebrew Scriptures associate anger with God and major figures, it also heavily warns against anger. Anger leads to nothing good (Eccl. 7:9; Ps. 37:8).



Remember Cain and Abel (Gen. 4) and Jonah's temper tantrum (ch 4) which reveal the destructiveness and futility of anger. Centuries of Hebrew Rabbinical teachings speak against anger. The Hebrew Scriptures connect anger and sin, such as in the Psalms (4:4) and warn of the destructiveness of anger, such as in Proverbs where it is written, "A harsh word stirs up anger" (15:1). You may remember Saint Mark 3:5, in recounting Jesus' healing of the man with the withered hand, says "He [Jesus] looked around at them with anger . . . grieved at their hardness of heart . . ." (3:5). Interestingly, Saint Matthew, in his version of this healing omits that detail (12:9-14). Why?

Clearly Saint Matthew the Evangelist wants to issue a strong warning about the dangers of harboring anger in the heart. At the same time, though, he offers reconciliation as an antidote to anger. The picture here is not isolated individuals seeking to subdue their passions but disciples going about the often awkward task of trying to right perceived wrongs. **This Gospel –**

which assumes that anger does not have power over us unless we consent – unless we allow it entry into our hearts – tells us that anger is not to be hidden or disregarded. Nor should we foolishly act upon its impulses. Anger should instead be dealt with by becoming the opportunity for repairing broken relationships. It is when rapport and harmony are established with the objects of anger that anger disappears.

I hesitate to cast a pall over our Valentine's Day chocolate and roses with an Edgar Allen Poe reference, but it can't be helped. I can't stop thinking about the title of his short story “The Tell Tale Heart.” It's a macabre story of a man snuffing out the life of another and burying him under the floorboards, then hearing his heart pounding in his ears.

My only excuse for using this analogy is that this text, in which Jesus reveals the inward sickness that is the source of so many outward symptoms, is hardly the stuff of which Hallmark cards are made. I hear a heart throbbing throughout this passage a telltale heart. We may be confident that we're not wearing our heart on our sleeve. We may be sure that we've buried it beneath the floorboards, out of sight of the world. But if it contains angry thoughts, lustful intentions, and disrespect for God and others, there is no way it will stay our little secret. Ask yourselves, my friends, what's in your heart this Valentine's Day?

