

Enlightened Self-Interest

February 12, 2023

Just One

My last year at St. Norbert, I lived in a house with seven other women. Yes, it was everything that you just imagined - the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Some of my positive memories are the little phrases and inside jokes that rose up from living so closely together. One of those came from a movie. For the life of me, I can't even remember the title, but it included a woman who, for some reason, was supposed to be limiting her alcohol intake. She would regularly show up on screen with a glass the size of a fishbowl and say, "What? I can have one." Because none of us were particularly big drinkers, it became a running joke in the house. "What? I can have one." As a rather naive 21 year old, I didn't think of all of the psycho-social issues underlying the caricature.

The reason I did laugh is the reason I bring up the phrase today. We've been reading and praying with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew for a month now. We read about loving our enemies, about people being blessed amidst the struggles of life, about being salt and light, that is, about being conduits of God's love and grace and healing and hope. If I were to sum up today's Gospel in one phrase, it's about living the spirit of the law, instead of the letter of the law.

Back to the running joke among my college roommates: the reason "What? I can have one" was funny was we could all see the hypocrisy in calling a fishbowl of wine one glass. We were laughing at someone pretending to follow the rules while blatantly thwarting them.

The Scriptures

As we finish up our month of worshipping with the Sermon on the Mount, it's interesting to note that part of what the Gospel of Matthew tries to do is show us readers that Jesus is the new Moses. When we know that, we're able to look at what is similar and different between Moses' experience going up Mount Sinai to receive the 10 Commandments and what Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount to glean even deeper meaning than would be found at first glance. The fact that Matthew intends his readers to hold the 10 Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount up to one another makes today's reading pop.

- Jesus says, "You have heard it said...but I say to you" numerous times. "You have heard it said 'Thou shall not murder,' but I say to you anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be liable to judgment."
- Jesus says, "You have heard it said 'You shall not commit adultery,' but I say to you everyone who looks at someone with lust commits adultery in their heart."

What Jesus is doing here is he's saying that just living the letter of the law isn't enough.

Years ago, when I was in ministry in the Catholic Church, one of my responsibilities was to prepare young people for their First Confession, and part of that included a series of parent meetings, so that what we were teaching at church could be reinforced at home. I'll never forget

the parent meeting when one of the dads stood up, and with all earnestness asked, “I don’t break any of the 10 commandments, what do I have to confess?”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is saying that it’s not enough to just obey the 10 Commandments. We need to live the spirit that is underlying them. Not murdering is a good start, but dealing with our anger in constructive, relationship-affirming ways is what is expected of someone who is actually following God. Not committing adultery is a good start, but actually honoring our partners and our commitments to them is truly Godly.

Jesus goes on, beyond the passage we read today, speaking of divorce and taking oaths and retaliation. In each of these sayings, Jesus is telling us that living a life of character is more than simply following the rules. It’s looking at the reasons for the rules and embodying those.

Examples of this abound: I remember a while back a presidential candidate who, when critiqued about particularly shady business practices, said, “Everything I did was legal.” Just because something is legal, doesn’t mean it is right. There’s a phrase these days to call someone you work closely with your “work wife” or “work husband.” And while that may be a cute way of acknowledging how important and strong your working relationship may be, the dark side of that is the lack of effort folks often put into their marriage, even at the same time they are nurturing and strengthening this other partnership.

When something negative happens at our house, Scott and I often talk about how our parents would have fought over it. Just yesterday, he opened the refrigerator door and a jar of salad dressing fell out and broke. As we cleaned it up, we talked about how in both of our households growing up, whichever parent had opened the door would have gotten mad at the other, blaming them for the fridge being too full, the dressing placed thoughtlessly. Getting mad about a broken bottle of dressing is not murder, but the anger and judgment that characterized our parents’ reactions to household mistakes were toxic. They didn’t kill each other, but they did kill their marriages.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is telling us to nip those things in the bud. Behave well toward one another. Don’t just do the absolute minimum, but actually strive to be good and do right by one another.

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At the end of the day, what Jesus was doing was teaching about how to live well together. What he’s doing is giving us tools and resources to move us beyond our basic animal instincts, beyond selfishness and me-first ways of being. You’ve heard the phrase, “An eye for an eye and the world goes blind?” Following Jesus is making a commitment to be about making our relationships and our society work better than if we were just looking out for number one.

And here’s the crazy thing: it’s all enlightened self-interest. Scott not going off on me yesterday about the broken bottle of salad dressing served us all well. He got to work on cleaning it up, I made sure the toddler and the dog were out of harm’s way, and no one went away feeling hurt or put upon or undervalued. And today, I’ll do some organizing. But by not letting anger rule the situation, we circumvented the resentment and bitterness that could have marred the rest of the

day and chipped away at our foundation. Dealing healthily with our anger, with our attractions, with the oaths we make and the ways we're tempted to retaliate are all enlightened self-interest.

What this really comes down to is cultivating virtues, rather than abiding by rules. Being a person of character, beyond obeying the law. One virtue that some leaders in our church have been studying for the past several years is generosity. I'll be honest, we've been studying generosity, in part, to find ways to make sure this organization has the resources we need to continue our vital work. But as we've dug in, cultivating generosity is a profoundly compelling way of living, and it's a foundational principle of following Jesus.

I've asked the ushers to hand out slips of paper with a quote on them from Christian Smith, who is part of the Generosity Project at the University of Notre Dame:

Generosity is the virtue of giving things to others freely and abundantly. It is a learned character trait that involves attitude and action entailing both the inclination and actual practice of giving abundantly. It is not a haphazard behavior but a basic orientation to life. What we give generously can vary: money, possessions, time, attention, aid, encouragement, and more, but it always intends to enhance the true wellbeing of the receiver. Like all virtues, generosity is in people's genuine enlightened self-interest to learn and practice.

– adapted from Christian Smith, The Generosity Project

In the couple of minutes we have left, I invite you to turn to someone near you and talk a little about what words or phrases in this quote catch your attention. Or even more broadly, how the idea of cultivating the spirit of the law over the letter of the law shapes how you follow Jesus.

Conclusion

Friends, in Coffee Hour today, Outreach Ministry is hosting a Souper Bowl Sunday fundraiser, offering soup and goodies for a free-will offering in an effort to raise funds to support the monthly meal we serve at NEW Community Shelter. I'm sure the soups are lovely, but even if they're not, I'm going to drop a much larger bill into the offering basket than I would had we gone out to brunch. My motivation is living generously, living beyond what is required and into the Spirit, participating in this economy of grace in which we live and give not to the penny but with abundance. Whatever situations you find yourself in this week, my prayer for all of us is that we will listen to Jesus and push ourselves to live beyond the law and into the spirit. In doing so, may this world be a little closer to God's Kingdom for all of us. Amen.

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