

“The Interior”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
6th Sunday after the Epiphany – 16 February 2014
Matthew 5:21-37

In this section of The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes some claims that seem outrageous to us. He says, “If you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment,” just as someone who has committed murder would be. Jesus compares the anger we carry against another person to killing them in cold blood. Certainly, in rare cases, the anger inside us can lead to murder, but with a modest effort of willpower you can harbor anger in your heart toward someone else, and they can keep on breathing.

Likewise, Jesus says, “that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” That’s bad news for just about every straight teenage boy, ever. By Jesus’ standards, I probably committed adultery the first time at the age of 12, a full 12 years before I got married. Who knew you could commit adultery prior to marriage?

Jesus then goes on to suggest that if our eye beholds beauty and desires it, or somehow otherwise causes us to offend, then we should reach for a grapefruit spoon and scoop it out. Same goes for a hand that causes us to sin. Sharpen your butcher’s knife and lay your wrist on the chopping block. It feels gruesome and excessive, and I suspect if we followed his instructions literally, there would be few hands and fewer eyes in the congregation.

Jesus starts to wind up this portion of the sermon by denouncing divorce, except in cases of unchastity, which received a new definition in the preceding paragraph, so that unchastity could easily be defined as lustful thoughts, since that’s now just the same as adultery. By combining the two together, just about anybody could claim grounds for divorce *on Jesus’ own terms*, though I’m pretty sure that’s not what Jesus intended.

Jesus finishes by raging against swearing, insisting that a simple “Yes” or “No,” twice delivered, ought to suffice as an answer, and any oath taken by heaven or earth “comes from the evil one.” Think about that the next time you give sworn testimony, or watch a government official or a soldier or a newly naturalized citizen take an oath of office or an oath of allegiance to our country.

If you feel perplexed by these verses, if you sense a palpable absence of grace and forgiveness, you are not alone. These words of Jesus leave the ashy taste of judgment in the mouth, dry and bitter. This piece of the Sermon on the Mount seems to deviate so far from what Jesus said elsewhere about love and freedom and the hope of redemption. In the very next verse after what we heard read today, Jesus rejects the Old Testament standard of “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Yet he’s recommending severed hands and plucked out eyeballs for sinful thoughts and actions. What’s Jesus up to?

The common thread seems to be that what’s happening on the inside is just as important, if not more so, than what happens on the outside, and that makes sense in the broader context of the Gospel, where Jesus enters into frequent conflict with the self-proclaimed experts on the Law. They want to trip him up, to embarrass him by exposing some ignorance or unorthodoxy, so that people will stop listening to Jesus and stop following him. At every turn they fail, and at every turn Jesus gives a fresh interpretation of the Law that often seems more severe than the typically accepted understanding, because it emphasizes our inward state over our outward action.

Again and again, Jesus broadens the Law so that it includes our thoughts, intentions, and attitudes. What’s happening on the inside matters just as much as what’s happening on the

outside, because what's happening inside our heads and hearts, no matter how much restraint we exercise, eventually impacts other people. It's also a matter of authenticity and deep integrity.

A man wants to make love to that beautiful woman married to someone else but doesn't, probably out of fear of punishment and the condemnation of others. The restraint he exhibits is not motivated by what is right. His restraint is motivated by the risk of being found out and the fear of the consequences. Fear, not love, risk, not righteousness, keeps him from committing the act he fantasizes about. Jesus calls us to higher standards, purer motives.

Likewise, a person is angry and daydreams about harming or even killing the person who has aroused that anger, but they don't do it, because they're simply squeamish or afraid of being caught and sent to prison and losing their freedom or being executed and losing their life. Again, the motive is selfish. I choose not to kill this person because of the negative consequences it would have on me, if I got caught, but inside the mind and heart, we indulge in thoughts of destruction and disaster for the person who raised our ire.

Jesus reveals a deeper wisdom, to which we need to pay heed. He understood that real faith penetrates every layer of a person, right down to the core. If we do the right thing outwardly, but inwardly harbor all sorts of sinful thoughts and desires and attitudes, then we are at perpetual war with ourselves. Over time, that state of affairs erodes our integrity. We disintegrate.

Jesus wants more for us. He wants us to live in peace, not only with others, but with ourselves. Only then can we receive and rejoice over the grace and mercy of God. Until we display some measure of integrity and peace, until we allow faith to alter every aspect of who we are to some degree, God's grace and mercy are mere concepts to us, not realities; concepts that frequently go misunderstood, if not outright neglected.

Yet how can we achieve such a sublime state of mind? It seems almost inhuman to expect that our anger can always be quickly quenched, our sensitivity to offense or the physically desirable dulled to the point where neither elicits an emotional response. Are we to reject our passions, one of the core elements that make us human? Even Jesus got angry with his opponents, as they baited him. He said harsh words and made them look foolish.

I think what Jesus wants for us, what Jesus wants from us, is that we learn to release emotions and feelings that threaten to imprison and destroy us. Jesus wants to liberate us from the consuming fire of anger and lust, so that we can be free to experience the more fulfilling sensations of joy and hope and peace and love. Our freedom will require sacrifice, and letting go of our grudges and ceasing to indulge in certain fantasies may feel like tearing out an eye or chopping off a hand, because those mental images have created a narrative that seems like an integral part of who we are. However, such sacrifices are necessary and worth it if we want to be faithful and receive the fruits of faith.

I think Jesus wants us to keep our commitments to God and to each other for the right reasons, and to do so in the right way, with integrity and authenticity. We need not make solemn oaths when the simple answer of yes or no will suffice, and the yes or no that matters more than any other is the yes or no answer we give to God's offer of unconditional love every moment of every day.

I think Jesus calls us to ideas and attitudes and motivations that seem inhuman, because Jesus wants us to transcend our common, sinful humanity and live into God's higher purpose for human beings, as creatures created in the image of God, ready to share with others the abundance God so generously gives.

Still, it seems impossible to meet such extraordinary standards, and time after time, we will fail. We cannot do such hard things alone, but grace carries us beyond our own natural abilities, and forgiveness heals our faults, if we ask for those blessings and receive them with humility. Prayer is indispensable to this endeavor, and not just the asking and the thanking type of prayer, precious as that is, but the patiently sitting silent type of prayer, that waits for God and seeks out discernment and guidance. It's hard work, but as St. Augustine once said, "Work as if everything depends upon you, and pray as if everything depends on God." The second part of that sentence is right on the mark.

Jesus didn't come to leave us as we are or to ask for minor adjustments to our behavior. Jesus came to transform us – body, mind, and spirit – into people who act and look and feel much differently from what we did before. It is largely a gradual process with occasional breakthroughs. Faith can be frustrating, but over time it takes us to a new world of altered perception.

We will see things in a different light, and the brighter the horizon becomes, we look back at where we used to be and wonder how we ever derived any happiness or pleasure from that shadowy, confusing, conflicted place. We will feel differently, kept warm now not by our anger and hate and unquenchable desires, but by God's love. We will be different, no longer at war with ourselves and others, but abiding in a deep peace.

Yes, Jesus made some outrageous claims in the Sermon on the Mount. At closer inspection, though, they make sense, because the primary claim Jesus makes is a claim he stakes on us. We belong to him, and we could never ask for better. Amen.