

**IMPORTANT INFORMATION:** The stories, and other elements of this sermon, contain copyrighted materials. We purchase them and have permission to use them in our parish, but not outside of it. Please do not post this sermon, or the stories in it, on any social media site. That would violate our agreement and subject us to a fine

**Epiphany 6 A –Feb. 12, 2023**

**“Being Good”**

**Read: Matthew 5: 20 - 37/ Memorize: Matthew 5: 20.**

People often think that one of the reasons to come to church is to become a better person. In their minds, the main function of religion, any religion, was to make you better than you would have been if you had not gotten up on a cold February day. Even if you have not arrived at the goodness yet, by attending, it means you’re on your way.

Yet, as we read the gospels, we notice something. A lot of the good people, those scribes, Pharisees and others, made a lot of trouble for Jesus. They perceived they were good and made sure everyone knew it. They were among those shouting, “Crucify.”

Why did they want to crucify Jesus? One reason was the way Jesus lived. We heard Jesus say last week that He did not want to “abolish the law or the prophets,” but in the eyes of those “good people,” that’s exactly what He did.

They questioned His disciples: “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” This was a clear violation of the Law in the Torah, the five books of Moses. Jesus’ saying, “I haven’t come for you good people. “I’ve come to seek and save the bad,” probably didn’t please them

John tells the story of a woman who is caught in adultery in John 8: 1 – 11. The crowd brought her to Jesus and asked Him what should be done. The good people knew the answer: she should be stoned. This was a trap for Him. They had already rendered their verdict.

Jesus says, “Let him who is without sin throw the first stone.” One by one, they dropped their stones and slipped away. So again, Jesus seems to be sneering at the self-righteous, it's Jesus verses the cruelty of misguided “good” people.

The Gospel reading gives us a lot of things to think about. Jesus is saying that the rules and regulations can’t save. They believed they could. Today, we would likely call them legalists. They point at the law and say that’s how it has to be.

But times have changed. Most people in our society are in greater danger of antinomianism than legalism. Can you say it, antinomianism? These are people who

believe that the law no longer applies at all. They have moved from the awareness that just obeying a few rules makes you right to the conviction that no rules are right. The assumption seems to be anything goes with those folks.

We might see in Jesus' application of the religious laws; His foreshadowing a time like ours. Perhaps this story would play out like this now: they gathered to stone a woman to death for adultery.

Jesus says, "Let the one who is without sin throw the first stone." As they silently drop their stones and slip away, Jesus says to the woman, "I do not condemn you, go and sin no more." And she replies, "What do you mean by sin?" Jesus says, "Well, I mean like adultery, that's wrong."

She says, "What gives you the right to judge me? How do you know it's wrong when you know nothing about the relationship?" Jesus says, "But you weren't married to this man." "So?" she says. "It was a loving and fulfilling relationship."

Jesus really meant that He did not come to abolish the Law and the prophets. He really meant that nothing would change until the Law has been accomplished. And He really did mean that "unless your righteousness exceeds the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Notice what He does in this sermon: He takes an old command, difficult enough to keep, even for a scribe or a Pharisee, and intensifies that command. "You know you're forbidden to kill your brother. I forbid you even to be angry with your brother. Call him a fool; you'll go to hell. Love your neighbor, invade your enemy? I say love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you. Judge not, lest you be judged. Enter by the narrow gate."

No wonder Matthew reports that when Jesus finished this sermon, "the crowds were amazed at His teaching." You want to be good? Don't just keep the law like the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees, you need to go beyond them.

Duke University's W.D. Davies, in his classic commentary on this sermon, said that this text, "stands as a guardian against every immoral or antinomian misunderstanding of the Gospel." It challenges us to be good, but that goodness will come from a different source.

It's as if Jesus is saying, "I've come to intensify, exceed and deepen the frontal assault of the Law." All of our sweet sentimentality about Jesus and gushy grace just crumbles before these commands. We are, as Matthew says of Jesus' first congregation, astonished. We hear Jesus saying, "keep all that I have commanded you to do."

The legalist, saying you have to keep every rule right to the nth degree is arrogant, but there is an arrogance in ignoring the Law. Jesus knows that without the Law, you won't seek the Gospel. It's easy for us to deceive ourselves into thinking that when we do good things, we'll become righteous enough that we don't need Jesus. We forget that God's goodness comes to us as God's grace, not through our human efforts.

We live in an era when people believe that they are the only one who knows what is right for them. Their own personal opinion is the measure of all things. They do not believe that there is any authority other than self. As we hear the Sermon on the Mount, we realize that Jesus refuses to back off in deference to our human frailty.

Just as He told those first century disciples, He reminds us, the Law will not be abolished, not one little dot. How can Jesus, knowing our frailty, intensify the Law, already knowing our inability to keep the Law in the first place?

And we get that answer about fourteen chapters later in Matthew 21 when Jesus encounters a rich young man. He asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to get eternal life?" He's been successful in getting everything he's wanted in life. He now wants to get what Jesus is selling.

Jesus responds, "What's with this 'good' business? Nobody's good but God." Jesus then goes on. "You know what the Good Book says, obey the commands of life, all of them, then you'll have eternal life." Jesus is giving him the chance to confess. Instead, He hears his prideful answer, "I've done all that. Am I lacking anything else?"

Then, in one of the greatest understatements of all the Gospel, Jesus confronts him, "Ok, you want to be perfect? All you have to do is one teeny weeny little thing. Go. Sell all that you have, give it to the poor; then follow me." Matthew tells us the young man slumped down and went away.

The disciples immediately chime in, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus now turns to them and says there's good news: "With you, it's impossible, but with God all things, even the salvation of people like you, is possible."

The Law, the excessive righteousness which Jesus demands of you and me, is a means of making us good, not as the result of our own earnest deference. Our goodness arises out of our being driven into the arms of a just and merciful God.

If God's demands are easy, we might think we could become good through our own effort. We wouldn't need a just, loving and forgiving God to save us. God wants us to recognize that we cannot accomplish our greatest need, the salvation of our souls.

Luther says that's why Jesus begins His sermon with "blessed are the poor in spirit," because, even if you felt rather rich in spirit when He began His sermon, by the time Jesus gets done with demonstrating your lust, violence, cowardness and sin, everybody looks poor, thus making you the exact person that Jesus loves to love.

The foundation for goodness is not the mastery of God's rules or skillful reinterpretation, but a relationship with Jesus. He commands us to keep God's Holy Law and gives us the resources to do so, namely through His presence among us. He comes to us in Word and Sacrament to assure us of His presence.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, after the sermon is preached to astonished disciples, Jesus tells us to baptize and teach the whole world; "all that I have commanded you." All? Yes, all. Even the bit about turning the other cheek, giving away all that you have; even the parts that sting. Then comes the punch line that makes the fulfillment of the Law possible and the burden of the Law bearable: "Lo, I am with you always until the end of time."

Count me in: How will you share the joy of knowing Jesus, and His righteousness, with those you know and meet?