

**6 Epiphany
February 16, 2014**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

In the early chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, right after the birth of Jesus and the visit of the Wise Men, Joseph takes the Holy Family to Egypt to escape the Slaughter of the Innocents ... the killing of all the children two years old or younger around Bethlehem ordered by Herod. The mention of Egypt, and the slaughter of children because a leader was threatened, echoes the story of Moses when the Pharaoh ordered all the infants of the Israelites to be put to death and the baby Moses is put in a basket in the bulrushes. Any Jew reading Matthew's gospel, or hearing it read, would immediately pick up on this and know that, at least to Matthew, Jesus was the "new" Moses.

So it is not unreasonable that the "new" Moses, Jesus, would bring down a "new" law from the mountain in the same way that Moses brought the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai. That is why Matthew places Jesus on this mountain to preach the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes, and then continues with the many verses that read "You have heard that it was said of old ... but I say unto you." This sentence structure is a reference to the "old" law of Moses ... the Torah ... and the "new" law of Jesus. In today's reading we heard about murder, adultery, divorce, and bearing false witness ... all but divorce included in the Ten Commandments.

If you'll remember from the reading from Matthew's gospel last week, in the verses just before the ones we just heard this morning, Jesus says, "Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." I believe Jesus is saying that the "old" law is not to be just thrown away. Rather, Jesus brings a new way of looking at it, and thereby living it. The "old" way of understanding the law was what was taught in the Temple. Ironically, I think the Christian Church has not moved beyond that in spite of Jesus.

I would like to take another look at the "law" and the role it plays in our lives. The stories in our Bible, and the theology of the Church, tell us that the God of all love has some rules that we are required to live by. If we break those rules ... that is, if we sin ... there are consequences. When we sin we are separated from God. When we sin we are "bad" people. At the Temple in Jerusalem Jews would bring sacrifices to the priests so they could get back in the good graces of Yahweh. In the Christian Church, at least as it developed over the centuries, Jesus died for our sins, but our sins nonetheless separated us from God. If we sinned we were a "bad" person. The Church taught that we have to go to confession, be absolved of our sins by the priest, and in some cases do our penance. In either case of the Temple or the Church, the institution was the necessary mediator between human beings and God.

Of course there are those exceptions to this generalization. There are lots of stories in our Bible about people of faith struggling with this equation. Sometimes it seems that God is just plain capricious. The fact is that bad things sometimes happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. Sometimes we are caught in the situation of making a decision between the "lesser of two evils." No matter which way we go someone is going to be hurt by what we do. But, for the most part, there are God's rules and when we break them we sin. That sin separates us from God. In the time of Jesus people went to the Temple to make sacrifices. Today, people go to the Church for confession and absolution.

Is there another way to understand this? What might Jesus have been trying to teach about the law that was different? I don't know if this works for everyone, but it works for me. What if God's loving-presence is always with us ... everywhere we go and in everything we do ... so there is no separation from God? What if there was nothing that could separate us from the love of God? Oops ... the Apostle Paul said that in his letter to the Romans. Oh, there are still rules which, no doubt, we will break. But, what if our sin did not separate us from God ... that God's loving-presence was always available if we were to only open our hearts and soul to it. What if the Church was not the watchdog of God's rules but rather the vessel that holds the community of faith as a blessing to all who are a part of it?

In Matthew's gospel Jesus ... the "new" Moses ... comes down from the mountain with the "new" law. Instead of murder being understood as just taking someone's physical life, Jesus expands the definition to include anger and treating others as if they were dead. Instead of adultery being define as purely sexual intercourse outside of marriage, Jesus adds fantasy to the mix. Instead of swearing an oath and perjuring one's self in "false witness, Jesus says we shouldn't have to swear an oath at all ... just a plain "yes" or "no" should suffice. Yet, doesn't that sound like Jesus is adding to the rules rather than, as he said, "fulfilling them." I think that is the point. In our reading from Deuteronomy this morning we hear:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

I think the Law of our Bible is somewhat like the Laws of Physics. We come by those laws by observing the world around us. If you throw something in the air it will always come down ... the law of Gravity. If you heat something it gets bigger ... the First Law of Thermodynamics. Maybe Moses actually went up on a mountain and God gave him two stone tablets, but I kind of doubt it. If God spoke to Moses I think it was through the gift of insight. Moses looked around him and saw that when people behaved by some simple rules life was better for them ... individually and as a community. If you love God ... and may I add, God's creation ... then you experience all of the fullness of life. If you listen to your ancestors ... at least your mother and

father ... they have some wisdom to share. Don't kill each other. Don't sleep with people you shouldn't. Don't take things from others. Don't lie about others. All these things make living together very difficult. It is much better for each individual and the community if you just live by these rules. Of course, having an absentee authority ... like God ... invoke these rules makes people listen a little better. So we get the story of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with two stone tablets.

But, as is so often the case the end got in the way of the means. Ten Commandments soon became 614 Mitzvot ... some other laws like not eating shellfish. And then the holier-than-thou piece came in. If I can keep more of these laws than you can, then I must be a more righteous person ... at least in God's eyes. The Pharisees were sticklers for this ... they counted out every last mustard seed to make sure they gave their "tithe." The more righteous I can be the more I can live in God's good graces.

I believe Jesus looked at it another way. I think he is reminding us that we have to live with ourselves as well as our neighbors and with God. So, look at the intent, not just the letter of the law. Make yourself whole by being whole. If these laws help you to remember your place in God's creation then listen to what they fully mean, not just the shorthand version. "I did not come to abolish [the law], I came to fulfill it." "I came to fulfill" all of it, even the unwritten parts of it ... even the parts you'll find between the lines. I believe Jesus is saying, if you want your life to be whole then here are the means to that life. God's Kingdom is here ... in this place right now. God's love is all around you ... you cannot be separated from it. Knowing that, here are some ways to live your life in wholeness ... as individuals and as a community.

One last thing. The confession we are using during this Epiphany season comes from the Moravian Book of Worship. It reads:

*God of all mercy,
we confess that we have sinned against you,
opposing your will in our lives.
We have denied your goodness in each other,
in ourselves, and in the world you have created.
We repent of the evil that enslaves us,
the evil we have done,
and the evil done on our behalf.
Forgive, restore, and strengthen us
through our Savior Jesus Christ,
that we may abide in your love
and serve only your will.*

And the Absolution the priest says is:

*God the Creator brings you new life, forgives and redeems you. Know that you are forgiven and be at peace. God strengthen you in all goodness and keep you in life eternal. **Amen.***

This morning, when you pray that confession this morning, assuming that you will pray it, I invite you to call to mind that you are living with God's loving presence all around you and within you. Hear the words calling you to a life of wholeness in the presence of that loving God, and hear the Absolution as a statement of fact that is already present in your life. You are forgiven, now know that forgiveness so that you can be whole.

Matthew's gospel casts Jesus as the new Moses ... the one to bring the world a new way of understanding God's Law. The old understanding was that our "sin" separated us from God, and only after beating ourselves up sufficiently, and then going to the institutions that brokered God, could we be restored to God's good graces. However, I read Matthew's understanding of Jesus differently. The intent of the law is just as important, if not more so, than the letter of the law. God's loving-presence is around us everywhere and in everything we do. That is Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God. These laws are about living our lives in ways that will bring wholeness to each of us individually and as a community. Yes, we will, from time to time, break some of these laws. But we don't have to beat ourselves up about it. We can turn to that loving God who has already forgiven us and accept that forgiveness so we can get back on the path to a fulfilling life.

Remember, you are a blessed child of a loving God that is ever present around and within you. Some ways of life lead you towards fulfillment ... this is what our spiritual ancestors have handed on to us. This is their observation.

I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God.

Amen.