

07/19/20

Sixth Sunday after Holy Trinity

Jesus calls us to a higher righteousness

Matthew 5: 20-26

“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder,’ and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’

But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.

Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,

Leave your gift there before the altar and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Agree with your adversary quickly while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.

Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have –paid the last penny.”

Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

It is the evangelist Matthew who has recorded for us the longer and more complete version of our Savior’s well-known “Sermon on the Mount” from which is taken our text for this sixth Sunday after the Feast of the Holy Trinity. Almost three full chapters of St. Matthews’ Gospel are devoted to this piece of our Savior’s instruction meant for those who were already His disciples—for people who had already recognized Mary’s Son to be the Lord’s promised Anointed One who had come to bring salvation from sin and death, for people like you and me. With its “beatitudes” in which Jesus pronounces those to be blessed who follow in His footsteps; with its clear renditions of our Savior’s call to His people to be merciful and forgiving and active in their love for others; with its instruction about speaking to our Creator-and-Savior God in which Jesus teaches us “the Lord’s Prayer”—that perfect model of petition that we can never overuse or wear out—it is no wonder that Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount should hold such a special place in the hearts of His people of faith. It is no wonder that this sermon should

sometimes be called the “Magna Carta—the Great Charter—of the Kingdom of God.” For here the Lord Jesus presents to us a complete picture of that life of love and service which flows from our faith in Him.

I

There are two ways that we need to hear our Lord’s exhortations and commands in our text. On the one hand, Jesus makes it very clear that what He proclaims to us here is God’s Law—His unchangeable demands for pure righteousness not only in our words and actions but also in our thoughts and our innermost desires, His Law that shows us our sin. “(U)nless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees,” Jesus says to us, “you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” The Pharisees and the scribes were known to be the most religious people in all the land—the most pious, the most knowledgeable in the Scriptures, the most diligent in following all the dictates of the Mosaic Law. Yet, says Jesus, those who want to enter the Kingdom of God must do better.

And our Lord makes clear to us why the goodness of those seemingly pious folk was inadequate. Theirs was a righteousness of outward actions only. If they did not actually commit adultery physically, they thought they were being chaste according to the Lord’s demand. If they did not actually take someone else’s property, they thought they were obeying the command not to steal. But Jesus sharpens the Law for us so that we cannot escape its cutting edge. He tells us, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder,’ and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.” We are murderers in the eyes of our holy and righteous Creator when our words and our thoughts and our innermost intentions do not measure up to His demand for holiness—His demand that we love each other perfectly.

Again, Jesus says to us, “(I)f you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” More important than even our outward acts of worship should be our putting things right with the one with whom we are quarrelling. Such reconciliation is a truer form of worship in our Lord’s eyes than our outward acts of piety.

Jesus makes it crystal clear, if we will not forgive and be reconciled, then we are judging our fellowman according to the letter of the Law. Therefore that will be the standard of purity which will be held up to us, and

that is the level of severity with which we will be judged. And that means for us, Jesus says, that we will not escape till we have paid and paid and paid—until the last penny of our limitless debt is gone.

II

In this way, when we hear Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" as Law, it shows us how far short we fall of God's standard. It condemns our sin and our lovelessness. It drives us to the cross on the hill Golgotha to find forgiveness and cleansing in Him who was crucified for us, who shed His blood to atone for our failures and our fallenness, who out of His pure grace speaks His forgiveness to us, and who makes us His people through faith in Him. And now we hear His Sermon on the Mount in a new way. We who have been baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity and who thus have received His cleansing and His Holy Spirit and His promise of eternal life with Him—we hear His Sermon on the Mount now as the description of that life of loving and caring for which we have been created, that life which is a reflection of the perfect and self-giving love that is the inner life of our Triune God Himself, that life which we can know only imperfectly now but which we will know in all its fullness in heaven. Because of our faith in Mary's Son, we hear Him describing here what we truly want to be.

That life of higher righteousness which is inward as well as outward—which loves in word and thought and innermost desire as well as in outward action—is the life which Jesus lived for us. He worked for the good of those He met—healed them, fed them, preached the good news of God's kingdom to them. He sought to teach also those who hated Him. He warned also those who were rejecting Him. He prayed that His Father would pardon also those who were crucifying Him.

We lay our failures beneath His cross. We hear His Word of blood-bought pardon and life. And—prayerfully—we seek to embody ever more perfectly that life which He describes for us here.

III

To love not only outwardly but in word and thought and intention; to seek reconciliation instead of more quarreling; to offer a helping hand of friendship instead of insults and name-calling; to extend to others the kind of forgiveness upon which also we depend—these are parts of that life of walking in Jesus' footsteps which flow from our faith in Him. Because here in this life we still carry with us the flesh with which we were born—with all its fallen weakness—we know how imperfectly we accomplish what Jesus commands us to do here. In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul pictures for us the inner struggle between our sinful nature on the one hand and, on the other hand, the new person in us who lives by faith and who is guided by the

Holy Spirit. That struggle, Paul reminds us, lasts as long as we are still here on this earth. Every day, Paul reminds us, we are to live our baptism. Every day we are to die to sin in repentance and rise to new life through our faith in Christ.

Your righteousness, Jesus says to us, must be higher than the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. Through faith in Him, we have such a “higher righteousness.” Through faith in Christ, we are given His perfect holiness as our own—the Father sees us as the ones who do not murder, who do not call others hurtful names, who always seek to be reconciled, who pray for their enemies, who in every way live the life of His virgin-born Son. Through our faith in Christ Jesus, the Father sees His Son in us. And out of love for Him who gave Himself into death that we might live, we seek every day to embody more fully that life of our Savior.

And as we prayerfully go about striving to realize His holiness in our own lives, we keep in mind that only such following in Jesus’ footsteps is true freedom. To hate, to call names, to hold a grudge—to do such things is simply to be a prisoner, bound by the chains of the egoistic impulses and selfish desires with which we have been born. Christ Jesus alone is free of those bonds. To live with Him, to be guided by His Holy Spirit, to love as He loves—that is the freedom He wants us to have.

May the Holy Spirit help us to live such freedom, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.