

ECHOING GOD’S WORD
In
THE CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY
Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 12, 2023

Lectionary Readings:

Sirach 15:15-20	Sin is our fault, not God’s.
1 Corinthians 2:6-10	God’s wisdom is given to us through the Spirit.
Matthew 5:17-37	Jesus restores the spiritual meaning of the Law.

Matthew:

Continuing the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew presents a series of six radical teachings of Jesus with respect to the Law (Torah) as interpreted by the rabbis of the time. Matthew positions Jesus as *the fulfillment of the Law*, reaching into the original intentions of the Creator for a meaning and value that might have been obscured or corrupted by human traditions. Jesus’ special relationship with the Father gives him authority even over the Law. The teachings of Jesus reach into the human heart (inner being) as the source of people’s moral resources. Outward conformity to rules does not fulfill one’s responsibilities to God. Sin comes from inner intention before it is expressed in outward behavior.

We need to be careful that we do not confuse *feelings* with *intentions*. Anger as a feeling is not a sin. Hatred of one’s brother or sister, though, implies a decision of the will that may be derived from anger as a feeling but for which I am completely responsible because I have accepted to put that feeling into action. Feelings as such do not imply moral responsibility; willful actions, though, even of an internal kind, are morally imputable. I am responsible for decisions I have made even if I have not yet acted on such decisions externally.

Sexual feelings are not in themselves lust. Lust implies the willful acceptance of the inclination and the desire to pursue it. Thus, there is sin in lust and not in the mere experience of sexual feelings.

Laws on adultery were originally framed to protect the economic rights of husbands and fathers of women. A violated woman was of no more economic value to a man. In later Jewish thought (Sirach 26:9-11), women were seen as dangerous to men because women were thought responsible for enticing men to lust after them. Jesus shifts the burden of responsibility for lust to the male who lusts after the female!

Oaths have to do with past actions (Exodus 22:10-11); vows have to do with future actions (Numbers 21: 1-3). Jesus would have his disciples not take refuge in the refinement of speculative distinctions. Only truth matters for him. Disciples of Jesus should have the right to expect the truth from each other, without the necessity of validating their words with oaths.

The law of Christ reflects Jesus’ own relationship with the Father: It is one of obedience due to love. Jesus is not the slave of the Father, nor does he feel himself oppressed by the will of the Father for him, hard as that may be. Obedience to God for us does not mean that our freedom is taken away. In choosing to obey God, we reach the highest fulfillment of our natures as human persons; we exercise our freedom at its most sublime; we choose to be identified with Jesus Christ who obeyed unto death.

Accepting Torah was a privilege for the Jews. It identified them as God's chosen people. Accepting the Gospel elevates us to the dignity of children of God.

Sirach:

About 180 years before the Common Era, a great teacher of Jewish wisdom (spiritual philosophy), Jesus ben Sirach wrote in Hebrew for the instruction of Jewish youth who were exposed to threats from Greek philosophy, which was undermining their religious commitment. The Hebrew text of this teacher in Jerusalem has not survived. Years later, perhaps in Alexandria, a grandson of Ben Sirach wrote in Greek an introduction to and a translation of his grandfather's original Hebrew text: our present Book of Sirach. Protestant editions of the Bible usually do not include this book since it cannot be found in the Hebrew *canon* or *list* of sacred books. Religious Jews in the Greek-speaking world had the Septuagint version of the Jewish Scriptures from which the Catholic Church takes its Old Testament.

Corinthians:

Paul is faced with a Church community deeply divided on many issues. One issue seems to be that some claim special insight or *wisdom* that others were not given in the same community of faith. Although Paul has been critical of worldly forms of wisdom while claiming for himself especially a wisdom that comes from God, he would not have the people believe that all spiritual wisdom was necessarily from God either. Some in the community appear to deny that wisdom is part of the giftedness of every baptized person. Perhaps these persons were claiming some kind of esoteric wisdom given to some but not all. Of course, this kind of wisdom would give special power to a select few in the community. Paul argues against this kind of special selection. All spiritual gifts come from God who loves everyone uniquely. My gifts are not superior to yours. Each of us has what God wants us to have.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you see your obedience to God's law as an affirmation of your freedom or do you see it as an imposition against your freedom? Have you ever felt valued by God when you chose to ally yourself with God and with Jesus Christ in choosing to do what is right? Do you see elements of adolescent rebellion in our choosing to sin? Could it be that when we sin, we are really only rejecting what we see as an obstacle to our maturity?

2. Why is it that we often feel more guilty when we sin with great passion (youthful lust; violent anger, overwhelming fear) when, in fact, we know that the greater the passion, the less the responsibility? Do you agree that strong emotions can lessen our responsibility for bad actions? How would you want to teach this to children and to youth?

3. How is it true that sin has to be internal before it can be external? Is it also true that virtue has to be internal in order to stand for merit before God? Can we ever impose morality on unwilling adults? Should we simply do away with all our manmade laws and just invite people to be mature and to be responsible? How do you justify the coercion of laws in society and in the Church?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

In your family or in your faith-sharing group make a decision about some “Valentine Action” that you want to do as a group. Choose an expression of Christian love and caring that you will carry out for the sake of some other persons or some other group. Then, do it.

PRAYER

**You, Lord, will always
treat me with kindness.
Your love never fails.
You have made us what we are.
Don’t give up on us now!
(Psalm 138)**

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

For Catholics, morality and immorality cannot be decided merely by consulting a list of approved or forbidden actions. There are no such lists, no matter what some may have thought in the past. In the Middle Ages, when priests were often not well educated in theology, lists of appropriate *penances* were developed for use in celebrating the sacrament of penance. Devotional handbooks for the faithful a few generations ago provided assistance in the examination of one’s conscience in preparation for confession. The authors of these devotional aids gave what appeared to be lists of sins. These books may have contributed to the notion that there were such lists of sins officially published by the Church. Morality is much more complex than that.

Jesus Christ himself is the standard for moral truth for the Christian people. His life, his values as he lived and died for them, are the basis for judging the moral rightness or wrongness of our behaviors. The Gospels, the other New Testament writings, along with our spiritual heritage from the Jewish Scriptures, provide the grounding for our moral reflection.

The Catholic tradition also appeals to the natural law for an understanding of moral standards. What was the intention of the Creator in fashioning nature the way it was? Natural, moral reasoning can give insight into morality. Certain behaviors are right or wrong in themselves because of the purposes that God has imbedded in the very nature of the action. Lying is always wrong because it is a perversion of the divine gift of human communication. Murder is always wrong because it violates the divine gift of life. Adultery is always wrong because it violates the sacredness of marriage.

Intention and *circumstances* do contribute to the moral mix of human actions. But in the Catholic tradition, we believe that actions that are evil in themselves, such as lying, murder, and adultery, do not become good actions because of a good intention or because of an unusual circumstance. I am not responsible before God for something I do not know to be a sin, but that does not mean that such an action becomes a right action because of my lack of knowledge. Undue pressures may cause me to have diminished responsibility for my behavior, but pressure does not render an evil act good. Intention and circumstance have an effect on moral responsibility for behavior; these do not change the objective rightness or wrongness of a particular action.

God’s law comes from human reasoning; natural law does not go against the divine law, which comes from revelation. It is one and the same God who gives both.

(See *The Catechism*: #1749 -1761)

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