

6th Sunday
2/12/2023

TAKING IT TO THE ROOTS

Two weeks ago, we heard the beautiful yet challenging words of the Beatitudes. Last Sunday we heard Jesus say, *You are the salt of the earth* and *You are the light of the world*. Other words that are well known and beautiful. Last week Jesus reminded us who we are and what we are called to be. This week he gets into the details.

Jesus insists that he comes not to abolish the law of Moses but to fulfill it. Jesus speaks his words on the mountain. On a mountain the people of Israel received the law, the word of God. Now on a mountain, the people of the new Israel receive the law's fulfillment. Jesus isn't just a rabbi. No rabbi would dare to say, The law says this but I say something else. Jesus isn't just a prophet speaking the word of God. He is the word God speaks. Today we find Jesus upping the ante and making explicit that which was implicit in the law. Jesus speaks of fulfilling the law, allowing the word of God not just to give guidance to our external actions but to let that word sink its roots deeply into our hearts, into our internal dispositions. We could summarize what Jesus says with the phrase, *Taking it to the roots*.

Sometimes we hear a call to do what is right in general terms. There's expressions like, *Do good and avoid evil* or *Love one another* or *Do the right thing*. These sayings are all very nice and very true. We need to hear them but we also need to apply them more concretely in our lives. That's what Jesus does today. In the gospel today Jesus is specific, painfully specific. Jesus takes it to the roots in four different areas: others, sexuality, marriage and honesty. These are all concrete ways we do good and avoid evil. Real ways we do that right thing.

Jesus quotes the fifth commandment, *You shall not kill* but he doesn't leave it on the surface level. To not kill is something good but that's external. Jesus wants to take things deeper. He takes us internally to the roots of our inner motivations. This is important because our actions follow our hearts and our thoughts. Often people kill out of anger or fear. St. Augustine wisely noted, an isolated moment of anger grows into hatred. Therefore, Jesus warns against letting anger or fear take

control of us. To deride others and call them names is something that can foster anger in our hearts.

Living the Christian life is a type of spiritual worship. There's to be a harmony between how we relate to God and to others. Unlike some pagan religions, both Judaism and Christianity connect the way we treat others to the way we treat God. It's sad to think that there are people who come to Mass and even go to Communion who refuse to speak to each other. It's even sadder to consider how this can happen not merely in our family of faith but even in one's own given family.

Jesus calls us to live in harmony with others, or at least to try to do so when we worship God. Jesus doesn't keep things at the minimal level of *Don't kill*, instead, brings out the implications of what it means to be in communion with others. He gets specific, very specific.

Jesus goes on to the Sixth Commandment, *You shall not commit adultery*. Here again, not committing adultery is something good but Jesus takes it to a more radical level. Here too our actions follow our thoughts. Jesus calls us to integrity and to treat others with respect not as objects. We call this respect chastity. So often this can seem as some negative but in fact it's something positive. Chastity means respect for ourselves and others. Another way to look at chastity is to describe it as integrity. It is something that preserves freedom. It doesn't stand in the way of love but rather is a prerequisite for love to happen.

Now our thoughts can be slippery. The point here isn't thoughts that pop into our minds seemingly from nowhere but rather thoughts that we know are inappropriate and that we entertain. In the first case, it is a matter of bad thoughts knocking on our door. In the second, it's a matter opening the door and welcoming them. This isn't so much a call to repress our thoughts as it is a call to shepherd and guide our thoughts because our actions follow our thoughts. Here too, Jesus takes us beyond the minimal, *Don't commit adultery*. Instead, he gives instruction that is specific, even painfully specific.

Jesus then takes this to its next logical step. This all pertains to marriage as well. Going against the grain of both Jewish and pagan thought, he condemns divorce. People are not to treat others as objects and property to acquire or discard and particularly married people are not to treat their spouses as objects and as

property to acquire or discard. Jesus' words are hard and can be very challenging. These words can cause pain and there are so many people who have known the pain of divorce. And yet, Jesus doesn't come to cause pain but to bring healing. The point isn't to tear us apart but to make us whole. Once again, Jesus gets very specific.

Finally, as with our actions, so too with our words. We're called to speak the truth; to be a people of the truth, to be a people of integrity. As our actions follow our thoughts, so too, our words follow our thoughts. Jesus is the word God speaks and elsewhere Jesus says, *I am the truth*. We show ourselves to be his disciples in lives marked by truth. Here too Jesus calls us to a harmony between what we say, what we do and who we are. Once more, Jesus gets very specific.

Here in the Eucharist, we're strengthened to follow in the goodness of Christ with lives of intentional faith. The Eucharist is a school of love, respect and honesty. The Eucharist is a celebration of new life in Christ.

Jesus offers challenging words but words we know are true. He doesn't leave things on the level of generalizations. Instead, he gets painfully specific, but in that pain we find gain. In that pointed challenge may we come to realize that Jesus comes not to drag us down but to lift us up. He takes us to the roots to lift us up to our place in the heart of God.