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A New Way

A buddy called last week. "I have a question to ask you," he said. "I'm Roman Catholic, and I married a non-Catholic, so the church doesn't recognize my marriage. I met a woman who is also a Catholic who married a non-Catholic so the church doesn't recognize her marriage either. Soooo, can she and I get together?"

I won't repeat my response, but it had something to do with removing his head from a dark place...!

When faith becomes a set of rules to follow, or loopholes to crawl through, then we are better off as atheists. When religion becomes nothing more than rules, it is dead and deserves to be buried. That is what Jesus is saying to us today, in a nutshell. And, he is saying something else as well.

When Jesus raises the ante on how we are called to live our lives, equating anger with murder, a lustful glance with adultery, forbidding divorce, Jesus is not creating a new set of laws that we must work all the harder at finding loopholes for (since there has always been, and always will be anger and lust and divorce); Jesus is instead pointing to a completely new way of approaching life; of approaching one another; of approaching God.

Jesus points us toward a different reality, a different way of entering and experiencing life.

Two weeks ago, we heard the blessings on the poor, the meek, the peacemakers, the mournful. Jesus blesses what we commonly despise or fear. And in his blessings, he invites us to wonder why.

Last week, he called us salt. He called us light. He invites us to look at who we are from a different angle, from a different point of view.

That we, gathered around Jesus, might become, like Jesus, a sign to the world of a different way to live life, a different way to live in community, a different way to live in the presence of God.

This different way has its beginning in the very beginning.

In Genesis, when God creates, the day of creation doesn't begin at dawn. Instead, according to Genesis, a new day begins at night: "It was evening, it was morning, the 1st day." In other words, night, the symbol of death, is followed by light, the morning, the symbol of life.

In the Bible, and for Jesus, life follows death just as day follows night.

But from the beginning, when we decided we knew better than God, when we headed out on our own, we have, ever since then, had it backwards.

Our days begin in the morning.

First light, then night.

First life, then death.

So it is no wonder that we look to power and prestige and money and self-interest to get us through this life. If life is followed only by death, all we have is our own wits, our own strength, our own best thinking to get us through.

But if life begins not at birth but at death, a death that is defeated by the resurrection of Jesus; a death that no longer

destroys, no longer obliterates; but is instead a portal to a new life, then, we might begin to reexamine where we have come from, and where we are going.

The death I am speaking of isn't just about my last breath. It is every death that comes when I surrender my wants, my will, my wishes: when you come first, when I step to the side.

Seen this way, today's gospel lesson is not a series of new commands, it is instead a new vision of who we are, and of how we are called to live in the world.

In the alternate reality that Jesus invites us into, death is defeated; the Kingdom of God awaits us on the other side of death; and yet, at the same time, that Kingdom is invading our world even today, right now!

With an eye on this alternate reality, Jesus invites us to be perfect. Now, don't freak out. When most of us think of perfect people, we think of insufferable folks; the last ones in the world we'd choose to be with, to be like.

Not because they ARE perfect. No one is. But because they ACT as if they are perfect.

That is not the perfection that Jesus has in mind.

The perfection of Jesus is not that we live our lives sinless or free of anger or free of lust; but rather that we will each of us sign on to a community that tries, as a group, to live without violence, to join up with those who, as a group, try to be faithful to our promises to one another; who mess up, sure, yet willingly seek reconciliation.

We sign on and try not because we are saints, but because we have come to know God, and in coming to know God, have learned

something of the character of God. We have learned that God is a God of non-violence; that God is faithful to his promises; that God seeks reconciliation with us. Hauerhaus.

Practicing this way of living life, day in and day out, with plenty of failures along the way, allows us to visit the alternate reality that Jesus embodies.

Jesus calls particularly on the strong to reexamine life and how it is lived. It is particularly to the wealthy, to society's "winners" who Jesus calls to self-examination.

We are to serve one another in this new world. We are to subordinate ourselves to one another; particularly the strong, particularly the well off, particularly those whom the world calls "winners."

The Sermon on the Mount, of which today's gospel is a part, begins with blessings.

"Blessing", in the Hebrew, has several meanings. One of its meanings is "to kneel." As the term is used in the bible, sometimes the one who is kneeling is the one giving the blessing.

That's weird.

We are used to the one who is being blessed doing the kneeling.

And yet, God's call to the strong, the wealthy, the winners, to take another look at how life is lived is mirrored in God's own humility.

In Genesis, God kneels before creation and blesses it.

On the Thursday before he died, Jesus kneels before each disciple, washing their feet, and enters into his closest communion with his friends. Ellul.

If God kneels before creation, and Jesus kneels before his disciples, what shall we do with one another?

Particularly we who are strong, we who are wealthy, we whom the world crowns "winners?"

Today's gospel is an invitation to transformation, an invitation to change from the inside out. Jesus isn't looking for "holier than thou."

Jesus is looking for adults willing to take a chance that God really is real; that surrender really is the way to victory, that death really does lead to life.

My friend, whose story I told you at the beginning of this sermon, told me something else.

"I'd like to join a community of faith," he said. "I'd like to believe, but if I do, I'll have to change, and I'm afraid to change."

This time, all I could say was: "So am I."

"So am I."

Amen+