

Something New

I'm sure you've seen the Direct TV commercial that starts off with some guy getting frustrated with his cable carrier and after a series of unintended consequences ends up with his father getting punched in the stomach during a blackout — the moral being, don't let your dad get punched in the stomach, buy Direct TV.

In some ways, Jesus is making the same point in today's gospel lesson, as he equates anger with murder, a leering glance with adultery and a curse with the fires of hell.

It's the story of unintended consequences when we let our anger or lust or exasperation with each other run loose in our lives.

So I'm imagining Jesus as the Direct TV ad man here with us today, saying something like this:

"Don't get mad.

Getting mad lets someone wrap you around the axel of your emotions.

If you let someone wrap you around the axel of your emotions, you will start to fume.

If you start to fume, you will yell curses in your mind.

If you yell curses in your mind, you will say "to hell with that person!"

If you say to hell with that person, you might find yourself in hell, because hell is the place where everyone is mad and wrapped around the axel of their emotions.

Don't go to hell.

Get to know Jesus.....and get a new way of life."

It's the law of unintended consequences that Jesus seems to be talking about so passionately today, but it's not a new law he's laying down.

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; to approaching one another; to approaching God.

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

Now you may be quietly objecting right about now.

"To make demands that cannot be obeyed makes no sense." J. Cobb.

This is what gives the Pharisees such heartburn when it comes to Jesus, since to be righteous means to obey the law.

How can I be righteous if the law you propose, Jesus, is impossible to obey?

Never get angry?

Fat chance!

Never check out that beautiful woman walking down the street?

Sure!

Divorce under no circumstances?

What planet are you living on?!

So the Pharisees are quite right to look at Jesus as if he's foaming from the mouth, because, for them, and so often for many of us, obedience to the law, following the rules and regs, if not completely, than at least better than that slob over there, well, isn't that what makes us right with God?

And don't feel bad if that's what you believe, because for too many years, that's what the church has taught.

The only problem is, that's not what Jesus is saying.

So here comes Jesus, saying something totally out there — that it's not our obedience to this or that rule that does the trick with God; in fact, we cannot be that obedient.

Oh sure, maybe we can do the easier stuff, like not physically killing someone, at least today — like not actually taking a friend's spouse to bed — but what about killing his reputation with gossip or cheating on the wife because of a love affair with internet porn?

Jesus is taking us to a place where the mirror is held up to my face and yours and in that mirror we can see the parade of foibles and failures, self-excused nastiness and marching bands of ego gone wild.

And try as we might, we can't obey ourselves into a solution: our own will power won't do the trick.

In AA they have a saying about alcoholics using willpower not to drink that is an exact match for folks using willpower to be obedient to God.....if you think willpower can do the trick, eat a box of ExLax, then use willpower not to run to the toilet!

If willpower won't work, if I can't be like the gal in last month's cartoon who says "Well, I could have thrown the first stone!" -- what the heck does save us?

What the heck is Jesus calling us to become, not simply for the sake of my individual derrière, but for the sake of our community, this community here today, and the larger community of humanity?

It is grace that brings us home— not my efforts, but God's kindness.

And since every one of us is incapable, on our own, of living out 24/7 the incredible demands of the law, especially as those demands are deepened and heightened by Jesus, what we have to rely on is not our ability to perform but our willingness to surrender.

Surrender to the love of the God who delights in making us whole, if only we will exhale long enough to make room for God working on us.

Surrender to the love of the God who delights in filling our hands with good things, if only we will lay down our guns and knives and self-help books long enough to receive these good things.

Two weeks ago, we heard the blessings on the poor, the meek, the peacemakers, the mournful.

Jesus blesses what we despise or fear.

And in his blessings, he invites us to wonder why.

After his blessings he calls us salt.

He calls 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, one that is rooted in gratitude, for gratitude is the fruit of grace.

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, in *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, ever since then, we've got it backwards.

Our day begins in the morning.

First light, then night.

First life, then death.

No wonder 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: and Lord knows a healthy bit of anger, a little bit of lust and being the big man on campus helps a great deal if you're trying to make it in that world.

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 the very entry way to a new life, then, we might begin to reexamine where we have come from, and where we are going, and by what power (our own or the power of *Grace*?) will see us through.

Don't get me wrong, the death I am speaking of isn't about my last breath or yours.

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.

It is the death we die when we give perfectly justified anger over to God, and leave it there.

It is the death we die when relationships are all messed up and rather than running away, we wait, we hope, we endure....

Seen this way, the impossible burden of today's gospel lesson is not a burden at all.

Rather, it is a new vision of who we are, and of how we are called to live in the world and with each other, not through our own efforts and abilities, but by surrendering to the hard grace of God, a grace strong enough to smooth out my sharp elbows, a grace gentle enough to welcome you in your fear.

Into this alternate reality, Jesus beckons.

Into this alternate reality, death is defeated and the Kingdom of God beckons.

And there is this.

Standing in the midst of this alternate reality, Jesus invites us to be perfect.

Now, don't freak out.

If you're like me, when I think of perfect people I 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 or free of divorce; 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 who willingly seek reconciliation.

We sign on and try, not because we are saints, but because God has come to know us, and in knowing us, shares something of God's own character.

We have learned that God is a God of non-violence; that God is faithful to his promises; that, as much as we worry about getting ourselves reconciled with God, to always remember that God is already reconciled with us.

Practicing this way of living life, day in and day out, with plenty of failures along the way, allows us to slowly become transformed so that the alternate reality that Jesus embodies begins to feel like home.

Jesus calls particularly on the strong to reexamine life and how it is lived.

It is particularly to the wealthy, to society's "winners" whom Jesus calls to self-examination.

We are to serve one another in this new world.

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 which 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 night 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, an invitation to fall to our knees with gratitude at the amazing grace that saves us all!

Today, Jesus isn't looking for "holier than thou. "

Instead, Jesus is looking for us to **grow up**; to take a chance that God really is real; that surrender really is the way to victory, that death really does lead to life.

So don't get mad.

Get to know Jesus.....and get a whole new way of living to boot.

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