

6 Epiphany – Year A – February 13, 2011
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37
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Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement regularly remind her fellow workers, “If each of us could remember that we are *all* created in the image of God, then we would naturally want to love more.” As we know, there is no love without relationship. God’s love is reflected in the nature of the One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Having just heard another portion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, we’re probably all feeling a little too close to the edge of the precipice to the pit of eternal peril. God imputes no guilt or shame on any of us for being fallible humans. Yet God *does* desire a relationship with us, and in that context to dig a little deeper as we draw closer to Him. So please feel free to set aside such feelings, because we are beloved children of God. Now let’s hear how God’s love, grace, and light shines through Jesus’ conversation with us from Matthew’s Gospel.

To enter into conversation is to journey with others, in order to be moved to a deeper level of understanding or wisdom. Such conversations help us to move forward into a new place in our relationships with God and with one another. As with all the common things in life, when we take it to a deeper level, the chatter of a worldly life – what the Apostle Paul calls the “noisy gong or the clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1) of talk for talk’s sake – becomes a meaningful exchange with profound ramifications. Today’s Gospel lesson is an invitation to conversation, originally addressed to the Judean teachers in ongoing debates about the most contentious issues of the day. Jesus enters the conversation to help us all reorder our understanding, according to God’s character and desire for all followers of Jesus. We join the dialogue recalling that we are empowered to establish and expand God’s kingdom on earth. As we add our own voices, we also remember that Jesus has come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. We also bear in mind that this is the season of light and growth, when we look to Jesus’ life and teachings to establish stronger roots, and a broader canopy of wisdom in our faith journeys.

The first issue being addressed is anger. Essentially, when we jump to conclusions, make assumptions, view others through the distorted lenses, or take hasty steps towards taking legal recourse, we are, according to Jesus, on a slippery slope. The first steps are commonly made manifest in disrespect, name calling, a lack of discourse, and anger with others. Experiencing the emotion of anger is not the problem. Even Jesus gets angry. Who can forget the cleansing of the Temple, where Jesus shouts at the moneychangers and overturns their tables? Nonetheless, Jesus speaks no words of condemnation concerning our natural human emotions, only words of wisdom that point to a better way of dealing with feelings like anger. We are invited to consider whether anger shapes our relationships, or precludes reconciliation. In this issue, like all the others we hear about today, we are called into deeper relationship. At any point in those first steps on the slippery slope to anger, and character assassination, we can stop, ask for God’s help, and then start to build a bridge of understanding and reconciliation, a pathway paved by apologies to the object of our anger. Objectifying other people is at least one of the root problems Jesus is addressing here. One of the most damaging dichotomies known to humanity is “them versus us”. As Dorothy Day said, we are all made in the image of God. By virtue of our common humanity, it can only ever be, me, you, and us. For better or worse, we’re in this together.

This brings us to the next section of Jesus’ teaching, which concerns adultery. Jesus expands our understanding of adultery to include both the precursive intent, as well as the act. Lust boils down to objectifying others as sex objects. Our society actively encourages us to engage in lustful thoughts – just glance at the magazine rack at the local supermarket checkout, or do a little research for yourself on the prevalence of pornography. There is a direct correlation between intent, desire, and the acting out of those desires. We are **all** extremely adept at rationalization. The gift of our humanity comes with an incredible power to talk ourselves into whatever we want to do. Yet it’s obvious that adultery significantly damages or

destroys the mutually supportive relationships that are the mark of God's inner life, and characteristic of kingdom living. The gift of our lives in Christ means that the power of the Holy Spirit is always there to help us maintain our integrity. We can't avoid the thoughts that pop into our minds, but what we can do is consciously stop ourselves from dwelling or pursuing such thoughts to a manifest conclusion. As Jesus proves, living with integrity is possible. According to Paul's letter to the church in Philippi (4:13), "[We] can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens [us]."

In the first century debates about divorce, some religious leaders took a very liberal position on divorce. A woman could be presented with a certificate of divorce by her husband for something as trivial as being a lousy cook or burning dinner, or for not being as good looking as the object of her husband's roving eye. Other leaders took a more conservative position, with a woman's adultery being the most significant grounds for divorce. I hope you've noticed the glaring discrepancy here, because either way, in first century Palestine, it was all about the men! It was extremely rare for a woman to divorce her husband. However, as a radical model of God's equality, impartiality, and unconditional love for all – male or female; Jew or Greek; slave or free – Jesus does not discriminate, and actively promotes equality, with special recognition for the needs and rights of the marginalized. In Jesus' day, a divorced woman was instantly homeless and penniless, and completely vulnerable. Jesus reminds us in the summary of the Law and the Prophets, embodied in His own life, that we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. How many of us want to be homeless or penniless? Today's divorce laws are much more equitable, protecting the rights of all parties involved. Sadly, this is not true in other parts of the world, where women are still considered objectively as the property of men. Our faith traditions continue to recognize the reality that we are wounded people doing the best we can. Divorce is not ideal, but it is often a good and necessary step in the process of healing, when a marriage is broken beyond the bounds of reconciliation. Unfortunately, this passage and others with a similar theme have been abused by many to coerce women to remain in abusive relationships. Let me be perfectly clear here. That is adding violence to violence to all victims and survivors of abusive relationships, and a gross misuse of Scripture.

Overall, the key point is that our living and active faith in Jesus is just that. In other words, being a Christian is a way of life in ongoing conversation with God and others. Faith in action is the intentional desire to be changed in our growing relationship with Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, by surrendering self in favor of trusting God, and discerning God's will. It means that we open ourselves to God's reordering of our instinctive responses and our ego-driven innate desires, so that we become realigned according to God's will. Everyone who drives a car knows that if the wheels are misaligned we can easily drive off the road into a ditch. Misaligned wheels wear out our tires faster, and lead to other mechanical problems. Just like our cars, we literally function better, have more energy, and avoid more problems, when we align our wills with God's will.

It is always Christ, working in us and through us, that makes reconciliation possible. Beyond our Baptismal promises of "I will, with God's help" is the truth of our faith as dynamic and organic, alive and growing. Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ... And 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22: 37-40). Most importantly, that's exactly how Jesus lived. As God's beloved children, heirs of His kingdom, you and I are invited to follow Jesus' example, and shine with God's light. And we are invited to participate in the conversation, as we move forward together, not just "talking the talk", but walking humbly with our God.

Amen.