

Sixth Sunday of ordinary time, Year A, 2011

Readings: Sir 15:15-20; Ps 119; 1Cor 2:6-10; Mt 5:17-37.

LOVE IN AND FROM THE DEPTHS

David Hollenbach, S.J.

The word gospel means “good news,” but the message of today’s reading from Matthew hardly sounds like good news to me. Jesus increases the demands of the law to the point where following them becomes impossible and even seems crazy. But I want to suggest that if we listen to today’s readings with care, we will hear some very good news that is not at all crazy. This good news is that God loves us in our very depths and that God’s love for us can enable us to love one another from our own depths.

One way to hear the gospel today—the way that suggests it makes crazy demands on us—goes like this. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us a new interpretation of the traditional law that governed his people Israel. He presents this new interpretation through a series of antitheses. First comes the formula “You have heard that God said to those of ancient times” followed by a verbatim quotation of one of the commandments of the old Law. Then comes Jesus’ reinterpretation— “But I say to you”—with a more demanding command that touches not just external behavior but interior motivation.

So the commandment not to murder is enlarged to forbid anger. The prohibition of adultery is expanded to cover lustful glances, and the prohibition of

false oaths is extended to forbid any kind of swearing, since a simple yes or no should be just as binding. Can anyone really obey a command never to be angry? Is it possible, or even psychologically healthy, to try to suppress all feelings of sexual attraction toward someone who is physically attractive? Are these changes in the commandments reasonable? Possible? Or are they just crazy?

I have been helped to see that this is not the only way to hear the gospel by a Lutheran pastoral theologian, David Lose. He suggests that Jesus' main concern in our reading is not really with the law at all. Jesus is talking about God and about the kind of relationship that God wants to establish with us in what Jesus calls God's kingdom. This relationship is based on God's radical love for us, the love made visible in Jesus's death and resurrection for us. This love is not something purely external. God knows us to the very depths of our hearts, and in those depths God loves us. God wants to draw us into a relationship with him, in which we respond to his love with a love that comes from the depths of our hearts.

God also wants to give us the capacity to love one another from those depths. Our relationships with one another need not be governed simply by proper exterior behavior. If we really know that God loves us to our very depths, we can be set free from the sort of anxieties and fears that prevent us from loving each other from our hearts. Murder had been forbidden in the Ten Commandments, but Jesus wants more. He proclaims that if we know how much we are loved by God

we could let go of unspoken anger and move beyond resentment of someone who has offended us to actual forgiveness. So Jesus tells us if we are approaching God in prayer, God wants us first to “to be reconciled with your brother [or sister]—from the heart—and then come and offer your gift [at the altar].”

Similarly, the law forbids adultery. But if we know in our depths how much God loves us, we will want to avoid the kind of interior feelings that can lead to disrespect, injustice (especially to women), and even abuse in sexual relationships.

Paul tells us in our second reading today that God wants to share with us a gift that goes wildly beyond what we have a right to expect. It has not so much as dawned on us, Paul says, “what God has prepared for those who love him.” What God has prepared for us is God’s own deep love for us that goes to the very depths of who we are. As we hear Jesus’s extraordinary words of love, and see his extraordinary deeds of love, perhaps it will begin to dawn on us in our inner selves that we really are loved. As this begins to happen, perhaps we can begin to avoid not just murder and adultery but the kind of anger and self-serving sexual attitudes that lead to injustice to each other. Being loved by God to our depths can lead to love for each other from our depths.

That is truly good news. Let us approach the altar to receive again food that is a visible sign that God’s love of us goes to the bottom of our hearts. Let us ask that we will grow in our ability to love one another from the depth of our hearts.

David Hollenbach, S.J.

St. Ignatius Church

February 13, 2011