

The Church of the Good Shepherd
Lexington, Kentucky
Sermon for The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany
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To the Jew in Jesus' day, the law was absolutely holy and absolutely divine. Aristeeas wrote, "The law is holy and has been given by God." Philo, the Jewish historian of that era, wrote, "Only Moses decrees are everlasting, unchanging and unshakable, and assigned by nature herself with her seal." The rabbis said, "Those who deny the law is from heaven have no part in the world to come." The reverence we show for the Holy Gospels as we carry them in procession cannot compare with the reverence shown in the synagogue as the scrolls were taken from the Ark during the service and carried around the congregation.

It was in an atmosphere such as this that Jesus spoke to his disciples about the law. How shocked they must have been to hear him, no less than five times, in rapid succession contradict the law and substitute teachings of his own. He made no apology and offered no defense. He simply claimed the right to point out the inadequacies of the most sacred writings out of his own wisdom and authority.

This new kind of authority is described by gospel writers in the Greek word *exousia*, which means "out from himself." It was not like the authority of the prophets who prefaced their remarks with "thus saith the Lord." Or of the rabbis who would say, "There is a teaching." Jesus' authority was not given but inherent in him. He himself was a source of information. He was an authority because his knowledge was not totally derived from scripture. He was beyond scripture. It was first-hand information. What he spoke was not simply what he read to be true but what he knew to be true. As one writer said, "He did not live in the prison house of quotation marks." It is for this reason that we call him "The Word of God." And, it is behavior like this that so offended the religious leaders that they eventually got him crucified.

There is good news for us in the manifestation of this new kind of authority.

When the authority of Christ is recognized, lives are transformed.

It is so powerful and so dependable that it captures the person who recognizes it and that individual is not the same any more. It captured the disciples. It captured a Roman Centurion who saw Jesus hanging on the cross. It captured St. Paul on the road to Damascus. It captured St. Augustine of Hippo. It captured Absalom Jones, the first African American Priest of the Episcopal Church. And it captures people in this room and around the world today, changing their lives.

Because of the revolutionary impact Christ has on people's lives, we are compelled to proclaim him as Savior and Lord in the mission field at our doorstep into which will sent from this house of worship after we have been nourished by Word and Sacrament for that purpose.

Last week we read the portion of the Sermon on the Mount that immediately precedes today's passage, wherein he says that our righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees. That is a very tall order. There are always plenty of people who feel that if they do not break the law they have fulfilled

it. But Jesus says that is not enough. One's attitude is important and positive action growing out of that attitude is even more important. No amount of the things we do *not* do adds up to being a Christian!

There are essentially three main stages of spiritual development. First, there is the natural stage. A person at this stage senses the reality of divinity but is essentially asleep. Then, there is the legal stage. A person at this stage is one whose heart Christ touches, shaking that person out of sleep. But the legal Christian tends to live out of fear and rigid obedience to the letter of the law. Such a person also tends to be extremely concerned about imposing the law on everyone else with the same legalistic faith. People at this stage of spiritual development are often intolerant, judgmental, and dogmatic. Finally, there is the evangelical Christian. Yes, we can reclaim that word for our work of proclaiming the gospel. It is a word that has served Christianity well and we have every reason and right to use it to describe our work in the world. For, an evangelical Christian is *one who sees the light of the glorious love of God in the face of Jesus Christ and has divine evidence of things not seen by sense, even of the deep things of God. Such a person discerns that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself* (to paraphrase John Wesley). An evangelical Christian in the truest sense, lives not by fear and judgment but by love and grace.

The new kind of authority manifested in Jesus Christ is the authority of love and grace, those who are captured by it are transformed from sleeping or legalistic persons into people of the good news of God's love. They are no longer living under fear and judgment and have no need to make fear and judgment the ethos of their relationships with others. Being reconciled is more important than being right all the time.

The new kind of authority searches the depths and promotes growth.

Jesus speaks of murder, litigiousness, adultery, divorce, and taking oaths in this section of the Sermon on the Mount. The old law teaches about these things. But Jesus wants us to know that not murdering someone does not deliver us from the explosive power of our anger; going to court does not deliver us from the state of alienation which precipitates the litigation; not committing adultery does not relieve us from the exploitive feelings of lust; getting a proper divorce does not release us from responsibility for the harm done in the live of others because of the divorce; and invoking the name of God when taking an oath or vow does not mean we are telling the truth. God not only sees our actions but sees our hearts as well. The law is a picture of what is on the heart of God and Jesus is concerned that our hearts both perceive and reflect that sacred desire. Jesus wanted the law, the desire of God written on our hearts.

In our collect for the day, we prayed that we might please God "both in will and deed." This morning's psalm says, "Happy are they who observe his decrees and seek him with all their hearts!" In our Rite I Great Thanksgiving, we offer God "Our selves, our souls and bodies, as a living sacrifice." Our souls, where our motivations and attitudes are formed, are to be joined with our bodies, which are the instrument of God's gracious will in the world around us.

St. Paul described the law as our "tutor." It guides us until we know it by heart. You parents remember how this works. You tell your child that the rule is that there will be no playing in the traffic. The child thinks you are the worst parent in the universe. Then, finally, the child understands that *not* playing in the traffic is a pretty good idea and no longer has to be told what the rules are.

Knowing this and knowing what is in our hearts much of the time, how can we stand such scrutiny? I'm reminded of the 130th Psalm, *de profundis*. Knowing what was in his cold heart, the psalmist says, "If you, Lord, were to note what is done amiss, O Lord, who could stand?" Another translation reads this way: "If you kept a record of our sins, who could escape being condemned." Such exposure of the secrets of the heart to the living God is a frightening thing. But the psalmist goes on to say, "But you forgive us so that we should reverently obey you." That's good news! God sees us exactly as we are and instead of condemnation offers to restore us, to remake us, to lead us from strength to strength.

This is the point Jesus is making. And he's not telling his disciples that the desires of our hearts are too strong. He's saying they are too weak for abundant living. Out of the authority of love, he's announcing that we should not be contented to allow these weaker desires of anger, animosity, lust, ambition, and the like to control us. Rather, we should let our great desire for communion with God be the one controlling passion in our lives. In *The Wake of Glory*, C.S. Lewis writes, "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

When we recognize this new kind of authority over the secrets of our hearts, God does not tie us down but sets us free to grow and grow from strength to strength in love divine. Then, Christians learn to cope with the weaker desires which have held us back. Then, for Christians, the law becomes a stepping-stone in our lives instead of a stumbling-block.

Now, can you see yourself as the person God created you to be instead of the old guilt-ridden, half-hearted person you once were? Can you hear the gospel, acknowledge God's authority as manifested in Jesus Christ, and see how you're transformed, how you begin to grow? We do not need to live in the absence of God (hell), in the domain of fear and judgment, when a realm of love and grace is open to us. In that realm, God knows what is in store for us and only God can make it happen.