

Homily for February 14, 1999
6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Charles Bowes

Sirach 15:15-20
1 Corinthians 2:6-10
Matthew 5:17-37

The world is very different in the eyes of those who will settle for nothing less than love.

I attended a meeting last week downtown and broke the law. I overstayed my allotted time in a metered parking space and had to pay a fine. I proved to be less than a good citizen...that was my first reaction to my infraction...but then I began to work on this gospel, Matthew 5, where Jesus blows law out of the water. "I tell you, unless your holiness passes that of the Scribes and Pharisees you shall not enter the Kingdom of God," says Jesus. We tend to use law as a tool to measure our perfection...at the root of this effort lies the insidious notion that we make ourselves perfect by our own efforts. ...In which case we never get beyond the law, we're surrounded by it and confined to it. My infraction was not so much over-parking, but of being insensitive to others who might have required that

space and to whose needs, while not hostile, I was at least indifferent. Jesus is not giving us a new law tougher than the old one. Rather, these verses of the Sermon on the Mount invite us to see things in a radically new way, with the eyes of the God who will settle for nothing less than love.

The law says, "Kill and you shall be tried for it." But Jesus then asserts, "but I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement." At this point us rational listeners exclaim, "Wait a minute! You can't go to court over anger. There's no deed, no action to take before the judge." And Jesus might rightly respond, "Right on! Don't think you are obeying God's law on murder just because you haven't killed. I'm calling you to something the law cannot reach, the disposition of your heart, the shape of your love. If you want to forestall violence, deal with the anger in your heart."

Murder had already been forbidden in the Ten Commandments, but Jesus plumbs to the heart of murderous intent. It is unspoken anger, violent language, quiet contempt of the other. It is

unwillingness to forgive. “If you bring your gift to the altar and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar, go first to be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” Perhaps that’s why our communion is aptly prefaced with the sign of peace.

So what’s a body to do? The Lord’s teachings seem futile. If we have heard these words through our law-abiding minds, our meager hearts feel diminished by Jesus’ standards. Who of us has not broken promises, or harbored resentments, or acted lustfully, or sworn vengeance, or faked our way through the day?

This Sermon on the Mount is not here to cast us down into helpless and hopeless guilt. No, it is an invitation to that high holiness that we have hitherto not seen or heard about. It is an excavation into our deepest loves, so that seeing what we love most, we will finally be given our heart’s desire. But it is a harrowing trip down into the mines of our motivation.

But the point behind these re-interpretations on murder, adultery, divorce, and oaths is not that a new, more stringent legal code is being set up. What strikes us is the impossibility, if not the comic exaggeration, of such utterances. To protest that such decrees are impossible is to be on the verge of understanding the wisdom these verses contain. If we take these verses simply as the law that must be obeyed blindly, they miss the point entirely.

Jesus’ words make no sense unless they are seen from the other side of legalism and outside the confines of self-advancement and self-perfection. Jesus’ words make sense only when we see that they strike at the very root of love. Anyone who is bothered by the “technical difficulties” of following this “walk” has not yet learned that love requires and ever will require more than any legal code could demand.

This weekend marks the first of our outreaches to the neighborhoods where our sole purpose is to proclaim God’s love for everyone we meet, to share briefly our personal experience of that love in Jesus Christ and to invite a short prayer for that to abide. Love makes us do this – not a law – but love of God and of our Faith in Jesus Christ. When any one of us speaks in the Lord’s name, we all speak; when one prays, we all pray – this is what it means to be the Body of Christ. Thank you for the prayer, the fasting – and the intent to keep it up throughout these two weeks of outreach. I cannot begin to say what an inspiration such fervor is to me, personally and no doubt to all of us.

This Holy Eucharist and gathering we share and thereby become the Body of Christ is love which goes beyond the law. One of our more sterling recent examples of this is Mother Theresa of Calcutta who said, “We cannot do great things, only small things with great love.”

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