

Homily for the Sixth Sunday After Epiphany

The Rev. Craig Vocelka

Readings for the day: Sirach 15:15-20

Psalm 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

The other night I watched one of my favorite movies, *Mass Appeal* – it's about a seminarian and popular priest who is the pastor of an affluent suburban parish. In working with the seminarian on preaching the priest tells him to never say anything that might be upsetting to the congregation. The seminarian asks if he isn't supposed to preach the Gospel and the truth.

One of the challenges of being a preacher is to find that point where I don't compromise my own integrity and I preach the Gospel in a way that you will hear. Most of my sermons are the result of my study, my prayer, and are words that I need to hear probably more than most of you do. So many times I have found myself asking if I should approach a certain subject or should I be more concerned about being liked and not controversial. Then I remember the vow I took when I was ordained, when I was asked by the Bishop if:

As a priest, it will be your task to proclaim by word and deed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to fashion your life in accordance with its precepts. You are to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor. You are to preach, to declare God's forgiveness to penitent sinners, to pronounce God's blessing, to share in the administration of Holy Baptism and in the celebration of the mysteries of Christ's Body and Blood, and to perform the other ministrations entrusted to you. In all that you do, you are to nourish Christ's people from the riches of his grace, and strengthen them to glorify God in this life and in the life to come. My brother, do you believe that you are truly called by God and his Church to this priesthood?

And I answered: *I believe I am so called.*

As The Reverend Michael Ryan (pastor of St. James Cathedral in Seattle), recently stated: *But what happens when the Word of God clearly clashes with the word of our political leaders? What happens when the moral imperatives of God's Word, and our deeply held beliefs as Christians, are at odds with the positions espoused by our elected leaders? What happens when to pretend otherwise or look the other way would be nothing short of cowardice? That's the time, I would say, when a preacher finds his deepest calling, and when a community finds its deepest challenge. It's also when we realize that the Word of God doesn't live in isolation from the lives of people to whom God speaks: on the contrary, it is in those very lives that God's Word comes to life. God's Word gets its fullest meaning it makes great demands, disturbs consciences, and stirs people into action. And while that may involve at times what sounds like partisan politics, it's really advocating for justice.*

Our reading from Sirach reminds us that we all have been blessed with our free wills and that we are all allowed to make choices. Some might say this is, in some ways, more of a curse than a blessing, after all it is much easier to simply be told what to do and then we really don't have to take responsibility for our choices and decisions.

This week our Bishop made a choice. Bishop Rickel and thus the Diocese of Olympia has joined with the ACLU and the State of Washington in the lawsuit against the Federal Government. In his statement he wrote:

The Episcopal Diocese of Olympia has joined with the ACLU to file a lawsuit against the federal government in response to President Trump's executive order banning refugees and immigrants from seven predominately Muslim countries. While the words Muslim and Islam are never specifically mentioned in the executive order, references to 'honor killings' and 'radicalization' evoke the worst stereotypes of the Islamic faith. The addition of sections that make exceptions for religious minorities makes it clear that this is executive order is a ban on Muslims in all but name. The purpose of this lawsuit is to block President Trump's executive order that intentionally discriminates against refugees based on their nationality and religion.

I feel certain that this will be upsetting to some, some will applaud his actions, some will be stunned, and others may have no opinion.

Our Gospel reading this morning is continuation of the Sermon on the Mount which we began two Sundays ago with the Beatitudes. Today we hear Jesus explaining the Commandments telling us they are much more than just the simple statements that were given to Moses on the tablet. While I've never actually murdered anyone, I know that I have insulted various people or harmed them with my words. Often times in my life, and I think this is a characteristic of all humans, I have tried to justify my actions, my choices, by playing games (if you will) with the law. I'm not really speeding – I'm just keep up with the traffic, little white lies don't really count, just to give some simple examples.

But the Gospel really doesn't allow us to "play" with the law in such a way. Jesus tells us that when Yahweh said murder, it means so much more. I have a picture of Jesus giving the Sermon on the Mount and it shows the disciples asking questions about the teachings and Jesus' reply is simply --- Did I stutter? I said, love one another!

In Matthew's Gospel, we're given the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus, early in his public ministry, explains to all those listening what it means to live in the New Times. And if that isn't enough, at the end of the story Matthew again has Jesus making it clear as to what it means to love and follow him when he tells us of the final judgment – whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me.

The Gospel **IS** challenging. It often creates tension – tension within ourselves, in our community, and in our world. I recently read a beautiful analogy about this very fact. The writer, a Disciples of Christ minister wrote: *I was reminded of the importance of tension. When you receive a new guitar, the first thing you must do is tune it. This requires you to tighten the strings to the proper tension. Each time I tune my guitar, I have this fear that the string cannot withstand the tension.*

I had an experience once in tightening a string that had outlived its life only to have the string snap in two and leave a nasty cut on my hand. I am reminded of this experience each time I tighten a string while tuning my guitar. And yet, I continue to tune my guitar and create tension in the strings because it is through this tension that the music (sometimes beautiful, sometimes not) rings out.

The same is true for our scripture lesson: the beauty of God's grace and Kingdom is that through the tensions, we are saved and enter into the Realm.

We like people who are like us – have similar interests, have similar tastes, like the things we like, believe like we believe and often I forget that our call as followers of Christ is to love all people. But our Baptismal Covenant calls us to this. Every time we renew our baptismal vows we are asked:

- Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
- Will you seek and serve Christ in **ALL** persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
- Will you strive for justice and peace among **all** people, and respect the dignity of **every** human being?

To which we respond to each question: I will, with God's help.

We make no distinctions about who we will seek and serve. We emphatically say that we will seek and serve Christ in ALL.

And notice that we say we will do this WITH GOD'S HELP. That is wonderful thing about our God – just as Jesus promises us – we are never in this alone, He is with us to the end of the ages. Knowing Bishop Rickel, I am confident that he did not make this decision lightly. I am certain that he did it with a lot consultation, with the approval of the Diocesan Council, and most importantly -- with a great deal of prayer.

As believers, as followers of the Gospel, we too are sometimes called to make hard choices – choices that cause tension. As my friend Barbara Cooper said, “Jesus re-orders our relationships and our internal soul-scape because God enters our daily life as loving Spirit and not as a "keeper of a checklist" of success and failures.” As we heard a few minutes ago:

If you choose, you can keep the commandments,
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.
He has placed before you fire and water;
stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.
Before each person are life and death,
and whichever one chooses will be given.

Let us give thanks that we are never alone, we have the promise of Jesus that he will be with us to the end of times, we have the promise that the Advocate has been sent, and we have the love of our God who is ever present to us.