
Reading Between the Lines

A Sermon by the Rev. Bill Harkins
6 Epiphany Year A
Matthew 5:21-37

In the name of the God of Creation who loves us all. Amen.

Good morning, and welcome to the Cathedral of St. Philip on this sixth Sunday after Epiphany. In her memorable story *The Violent Bear It Away*, Flannery O'Connor tells the story of Francis Tarwater, a fourteen year-old boy who is trying to escape his destiny as a prophet. O'Connor, who as you know was a native of Georgia, actually took the title of this 1960 novel from a passage in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 11, verse 12: *"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence and the violent bear it away."* In this story, as was so often the case in her work, there is at heart a theological exploration set in her southern gothic rural Georgia. Literary scholars suggest that O'Connor believed that both secularism and fundamentalism are forms of heresy that do violence to God's truth, and that only those with a passionate, even violent love of God can "bear it away." Indeed, among the most memorable scenes in this story is when Tarwater drowns Bishop, a young child who is actually his cousin, in an "accidental" baptism which bears previous wrongs away. This use of metaphor and hyperbole is linked to O'Connor's belief in the transformative power of religion. O'Connor was once asked why her stories were filled with such vivid and often violent, even grotesque characters and themes. She said, "To the hard of hearing you shout" for the almost blind you draw large and startling pictures."

Thankfully, we have not lost anyone here at the Cathedral to drowning by baptism, though I have clergy colleagues in other denominations who suggest we could use a bit more water. In some ways, however, the Gospel for today is reminiscent of a Flannery O'Connor story, if only for its use of strong imagery and, possibly, hyperbole which is simply the use of exaggeration as a rhetorical device or figure of speech. Was Jesus using the Rabbinic, pedagogical tool of hyperbole with his listeners on this occasion? It is certainly an abrupt transition from the gentler familiarity of the Beatitudes early in this chapter, to these challenging images. Anger, adultery, divorce, and taking oaths are topics found in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, and I found myself wishing I could have been there, if only to see how the disciples heard these teachings. We don't sell icons in our wonderful bookstore depicting disciples wearing eye patches, having plucked out their offending eyes, or posing like the one-armed Admiral Lord Nelson of Her Majesty's Royal Navy, with one sleeve tucked and pinned neatly at their sides, having lopped off their arms. I wonder if the disciples shared ironic glances, or wry grins, hearing Jesus teach in this way. They must have seen this pedagogical, rhetorical strategy for what it was a figure of speech designed to get the attention of those assembled.

When I was a sophomore in high school, the senior wide receiver to whom I was apprenticed was injured midway through the season, just before the big game against St. Pius, a regional power. I was given the task of filling in for him until he recovered, and I was scared. The game was played at St. Pius a stadium reminiscent of Clemson's "Death Valley" ---and hard fought until the end. I remember how late in the game a ghostly, menacing fog emerged out of the ravine on the visitor's side of the field, a fog into which a deep post pattern took me with a few minutes left. In my fear, and in front of 6,000 screaming fans, I dropped a pass that I usually would have caught. My coach called me to the sideline and said, **"Harkins! You're killin' me!"** which was actually an excellent but painful example of hyperbole for effect as a pedagogical tool. For the next week I had to stay after practice with my right arm duct-taped to my chest while the receivers' coach fired passes at me almost, but not quite, out of reach. That's about as close as I've come to experiencing the literal interpretation

of the imagery from this Gospel text, and I did not like it. My right arm had indeed offended me, and I wanted to keep it, thank you very much. My coach sat me down at the end of the week and said, "William, the point of this exercise is not that you should never drop a pass. The point is that you let your being afraid compromise your ability to be in right relationship with your teammates, and with yourself." I have successfully avoided thinking about this memory for a long time, but this week it came back to me, and I found myself wondering why, in the context of this Gospel, it resurfaced. This made me curious, and I'll say more about that in a moment, but any way you slice it, these passages from Matthew are hard to hear.

While a Divinity student I spent a year at the Middle Tennessee Mental Health Institute, outside Nashville. One of the last of the monolithic state institutions for chronically mentally ill, it was replete with gothic cornices and broad, tree-shaded lawns, and persons in white coats scurrying around. Conjure your most frightening images of such places, and you'll begin to get the picture of MTMHI. The first thing the supervising chaplain said to me when my turn came in the rota for the Sunday devotional was, "Don't ever use Matthew 5:21-37 as a text in here. The filter we have to discern between a literal and metaphorical hearing of this has been compromised by the severe mental illness of these patients. They get upset when they hear it. Really upset." At the time I was standing in the nurses' station of what back then went by the unfortunate title of the Unit for the Criminally Insane. I did as I was told. I wasn't sure this memory would actually help the cause of my homiletic efforts this morning, and so I did what any self-respecting pastoral counseling professor would do in this situation. I went down the hall to ask my preaching professor colleagues what they suggested. One colleague, upon hearing what the lectionary text for today was, said, "My chaplain supervisor at the mental hospital in my CPE program told me never to preach on this text while there." "Mine too," I said gloomily. I asked another, "If you were preaching this week, what direction would you take?" He paused, thoughtfully, and asked, "What's the Old Testament lesson?" Well, even they acknowledged that there is no easy way around the challenges of this text, but they did eventually help steer me in the right direction. Most commentaries suggest that Jesus is reinterpreting the law "just as he said he came to do" and as such these sayings represents new applications of what those listening already knew quite well. Others suggest that in reinterpreting the law Jesus is actually placing the former laws in the new context of an increasingly pluralistic, and apocalyptic culture, uncertain how much longer the world would exist. In so doing, Jesus was leaving room for understanding and embracing sacred texts in new ways, for a new age. Both camps suggest that Jesus was faced with the difficult task of shaking the disciples out of a stupor induced by having heard and been immersed in one way of understanding the law, hence, in O'Connor's words, the need to shout, and draw big, frightening pictures. I don't know about you, but I believe he succeeded on both counts. For example, why did Jesus begin his discourse on anger with a condemnation of murder in the law? It may seem extreme to teach on anger from that place in the Torah. Everyone within hearing of his words knew the law, and what it had to say about murder "as do we" but there is no specific teaching about anger. The comparison seems informative. Murder is serious business "on that they could all agree" but so is anger. There was a need in this first-century church to pay attention to relationships, and to how people treated one another. There is value to life, and to how we value and respect the lives of others. This is at the heart of this difficult text, my friends, because the issue is relationship "and in particular, what it means to be in right relationship with one another. In a recent homily Dean Candler spoke movingly about the Cathedral as a Beloved Community, and last week Harry Pritchett gave a lovely reflection about the extravagant, exuberant generosity of those saints among us who live out of God's abundant blessedness. The issues Jesus addresses in these passages "potentially divisive and destructive to be sure" are not the problem. The question is how we choose amidst these issues to be in relation to each other so as to create beloved community, not just by the letter of the law, but a generous, extravagant interpretation of what lies behind it. The writer of Matthew's Gospel begins with the known "with the law" and this is reframed in what is not so well known, which is what lies in our hearts. We are being asked to read between the lines of our own hearts and souls. In relation to this task the letter of the law can sometimes be a hindrance. The text challenges us to look at the law in a new way "an entirely fresh way of viewing human relationships. As my colleague Charlie Cousar put it, "beyond the prohibitions based on law lies the vision of restored humanity." Jesus interprets the law anew, providing guidance about living out a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. He locates himself in the tradition, but does not allow the tradition to have the last word. There is a theological tension here that I find compelling, and provocative. If upon theological reflection the images of being consigned to hell seem inconsistent with the purpose of promoting deeper, supportive relationships, this may give us pause to think about what our vision of hell might be. For me, it has something to do with alienation "with being cut off from others, from my own soul, and from God. When we pray each Sunday for "all hearts to be open, all desires known, and no secrets hid," I want to understand how to live this out the rest of the week, and to mean it. In this sense, Matthew's vision of restored, reconciled humanity begins to take on deeper meaning. In the service of this task, he draws startling pictures, and practically shouts to get our attention. Flannery O'Connor understood this very well.

In 1940, German tanks rumbled across the borders of Denmark. The Nazi forces already had control of Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, and encountered little resistance from the small northern nation. Soon, Norway, Holland, France and Belgium also fell. As part of their systematic oppression and intimidation, the Germans announced that every Dane of Jewish descent would be required to wear a yellow Star of David, the proud symbol of the Jewish faith and culture. In this way they would be robbed of their dignity, possessions, and their lives. The Danish government and people were in no position to do battle in the traditional sense with the German army. But their leader, King Christian the 10th, made a bold and courageous decision. He called for every citizen of Denmark to wear the Star of David for every Danish household to stand in solidarity with their Jewish neighbors. I can only imagine the fear that must have gripped the hearts of the first Gentile citizens who ventured forth from their homes the morning after the King's announcement. What they saw, however, was nothing short of a miracle. There were Stars of David everywhere on virtually every Danish chest, and shining from every Danish window. Because the people understood that in God's kingdom there are no outsiders, and that this must begin in our hearts, the Nazi's full plan of persecution in that country was never carried out.

Well, from here the hard pastoral work of relationship begins, as we understand perhaps in a new way what Jesus meant when he said that he came not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. Perhaps we hear in a new way what he meant when he said *"Now go, and be reconciled."* Oh, and one more thing. The night after my first post-practice one-armed catching drill I went home and told my parents I was quitting football. They wisely suggested I give it "till the end of the week, and that I not make a hasty decision about something so important to me. The next day, with my right arm taped to my chest, I took my place on the goal line, ten yards from my coach, and we began the drill. Then, he stopped throwing passes my way, and looking toward the field house, I saw why. Headed back out onto the field were three of my teammates in the receivers' corps, each of whose right-arm was taped to his chest. Without saying a word, they took their places on the goal line, where for the next three days they could be found after practice. I had threatened in my shame to consign myself to the alienation of estrangement a small taste of hell and instead, because of the generous, extravagant searching of their hearts because they "read between the lines" of the football field I found instead on that field a little bit of heaven; a vision of beloved, blessed community. Amen.