

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, isn't it just like the church and the lectionary to mess with our heads...especially with the timing of it all?

It is just a couple of days before St. Valentine's Day. What a perfect time to connect with our most common understanding about God. Above all else, God is love...we sing songs about the God of love, we pray to the God of love, we offer the gift of ourselves to the God of love. And then, today...wham! We hear these lessons about the Law....with gospel lesson phrases such as, "if you call your brother or sister 'you fool,' you will liable to the hell of fire, and if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away, it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell."

These are words from the God of love....the very heart of God made flesh in Jesus?

Last week, we heard Jesus say, "I have come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it," and "if your righteousness does not surpass that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven." What follows in today's lessons are the illustrations and implications of those statements.

Jesus came not to emphasize the law already well known to his listeners...and "Yes, of course," the disciples would say, "we have heard that before. We know that is what God wants for us." The Lord God knows that you and I can...and do..say the same thing: "Sure, we have heard all this before. We know what God wants...and we want it, too. The Lord God knows that I try my best."

But then Jesus goes on to breathe new life, new relevancy into these commandments by explaining what they mean in their fullness...by going to the heart of the matter. He explains what they mean if we are to love as God loves, because the law tells us what is in God's heart. Law exposes God's fondest desires of how we would live with one another...and the Law also exposes the difference between our hearts and God's heart.

You and I have heard it said, "Well, I follow the spirit of the law, not the letter." Usually this is said in defense of doing less than the law requires, which is sometimes justifiable and sometimes not. In today's gospel reading, Jesus is calling people back to the true spirit of the law and...for Jesus, what is at the core of the law is the truth of God.

The only life-giving perceptions of ourselves, our neighbor, and our relationship with God are found in the truth of God revealed in Christ Jesus. What are the truths that underlie the laws we heard Jesus re-invigorating? They can be identified as three....Peace, Grace, and Truth.

First, let us start with PEACE. The truth that peace is not simply a gift from God, but a stance that each one of us is to take in life. That sounds simple enough....a gift from God that each of us should

receive....but we often wonder about it. We mention it every Sunday at the end of the service during the blessing: a prayer that the Peace of God, that we really cannot understand, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

It is easier in some ways to consider God's peace when we are here in this building and this service. But far more often "out there"...when we find ourselves wronged in some way or another struggle with the situation. We know that we cannot be content simply to stew in anger...even though we will not kill or maim our transgressor. Really...who gets hurt from being angry?

Rather, we are called to look to God and find his example in response...that when God has been wronged by sin...from that of Adam right up to our own occurring even this morning...God did not then and does not know respond with hatred or vengeance, with sharp words or mean spirited whispers, but instead but sent his only begotten Son to redeem and save us.

His own Son, paying for our salvation with his own life, won for us peace with God. Jesus did not stumble up to Calvary with the cross on his back, calling his transgressors or tormentors names, but rather cried out, "Father, forgive them."

And the reverse is true as well: if we are the ones who have done wrong, pride and arrogance do not trump over the mandate for peace. Instead, sorrow and contrition, restitution and apology rooted in truth always trump pride or arrogance.

The second truth is about the GRACE of God, in what Jesus says today is that there is no evil greater than SIN. In using the extreme in the hyperbole of cutting off our limbs or destroying our senses, Jesus tries to shake us to realize that sin is not just part of the human condition. We just hear about it from time to time, give it "lip service" response, and let it continue in our lives. But Jesus insists we must make it a priority to rid it from our lives.

He is clearly not calling us to physically maim ourselves...even though we hear and read it. If this were the case, his own disciples would have looked like they at fallen into a food processor. In the wider context of the gospels, we find that Jesus often calls people to strive to overcome sin, but to do so wisely and patiently...like the farmer whose field was sown with wheat and weeds, and who waits until harvest time to pull the weeds lest they uproot the wheat at an early weeding.

Too often in our lives, we see the evil that is within us as just the way we are. We settle for the imperfections of our lives, saying in effect, "Well, I am trying my best. God knows my heart is in the right place by trying to do what I can." So, the little things, the minor vices, are OK. It is like, during Lent, saying that I will give up chocolate...tweaking the details of my life will make the difference.

But Jesus reminds us today that we need to remove any vice, any sin, whether acted out or hidden within so that we live in the grace of God's children.

The third truth we find in today's Gospel that moves us from the letter to the spirit of the law is that TRUTH itself. God does not lie to us...does not promise what he will not follow through on.

For God, “Yes” means “Yes”, and “No” means “No.”

Whether it is the profound promise made at baptism, in marriage, the profession of religious vows, the promises of ordination, or just speaking about how we perceive things, commitment and truth override ease and convenience. So, for us, in our relationships and conversations with each other within the Love of Christ, “Yes” is to mean “Yes,” and “No” is to mean “No.”

Peace, grace, and truth are interior dispositions and outward actions that enable to follow the spirit of God through Jesus, and therefore follow the spirit of God laws.

Listening to our hearts does give a diagnosis. God listens to our hearts and knows that even if we can keep the commandment not to kill one another, we still hate and despise others. While not willing to kill literally, we are willing to kill relationship with others, to treat others as if they are as good as dead to us.

God listens to our hearts and knows that even if we can keep a commandment not to commit adultery, we still can disrespect others by treating them as less than fully human.

God listens to our hearts and knows that even if we can keep from swearing falsely, we are still willing to manipulate others with our words, to lead others astray by what we say, to let our words be meaningless rather than let our “Yes” mean “Yes”, and our “No” mean “No.”

Even though we are made in the image of God, our hearts do not keep time with the beating of God’s heart. God’s heart sings out a love song, begun in creation and sung to us still...but our hearts fall far short. Real heart disease.

But, again, there is hope...all in the words of Jesus...backed up by all of the imagery he can muster through plucking out eyes, and so on. He talks like that in trying to drive the message home into our hearts...showing us, within the Law, the love of God. Showing us our failing and driving us into the arms of our merciful God. St. Augustine put it this way: “The law was given for this purpose: to make you...being great...little. To show that you do not have in yourself the strength to attain righteousness. For you, thus helpless, unworthy, and destitute, to flee to grace.”

That is the singular, great message of Jesus through this reading. We cannot do this by ourselves. We have tried...we continue to try on our own..and we always fail. The law...really, according to Jesus...is a call back to God, into the arms of God, who loves and strengthens us, and sends us out to love again. Bidding us to love more fully, more perfectly....impossible for us, but not impossible with God.

The sound of our hearts and the sound of God’s heart are meant to sing the same song...and we are given the Law...of God’s Peace, Grace, and Truth...that we might know more completely how to love and live in the image and love of God...most earnestly and intimately known to us as the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.