
Imagination and the Sermon on the Mount

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Epiphany 6 – Year A

“You have heard that it was said... ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment. ...I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:21-22, 28)

Wow. This is a tough gospel passage. Is anger the moral equivalent of murder? Is lust the same thing as adultery?

Where is Mark Twain when we need him? An eccentric businessman, of questionable ethics, once declared to Mark Twain, “Before I die, I want to climb to the top of Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud!” To which, Twain replied, “Well, I have a better idea. Why don’t you stay right here and keep them?”

Mark Twain recounts another story about listening to a long-winded preacher named Mr. Hawley. “Some years ago, in Hartford,” Twain reported, “we all went to church on a hot, sweltering night, to hear the annual report of Mr. Hawley, a city missionary. He told of life in the cellars where poverty resided; he gave instances of the heroism and devotion of the poor.” ...

Then, Twain goes on: “This Mr. Hawley worked me up to a great state. I couldn’t wait for him to get through. I had four hundred dollars in my pocket. I wanted to give that and borrow more to give. You could see greenbacks in every eye. But Mr. Hawley didn’t pass the plate, and it grew hotter, and we got sleepier. My enthusiasm went down, down, down — one hundred dollars at a time. (I was going to give just three hundred dollars, then two hundred dollars), till finally when the plate did come round, I stole ten cents from it.”

(Maybe I should end this sermon right here!) But the best thing, I think, that Mark Twain ever said about religion was what he said about the Bible. He said, “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me; ...it is the parts that I *do* understand.”

Some people understand the Sermon on the Mount, chapters five through seven of the Gospel of Matthew, to be at the heart of the moral teaching of Jesus. Almost all of Jesus’s sayings seem both easy to understand and hard to follow. The verses we hear in today’s gospel are among the most difficult to interpret.

This is a tough gospel passage. Is anger the moral equivalent of murder? Is lust the same thing as adultery?

One of the most rigorous treatments of this passage was written by the great theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*. Reading it is sometimes just as difficult as reading the verses themselves. Bonhoeffer says things like, “Jesus will not accept the common distinction between righteous indignation and unjustifiable anger. The disciple must be entirely innocent of anger, because anger is an offence against both God and his neighbour” (Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*). Bonhoeffer, in his rigor, claims that any anger against a person is a mistreatment of the person.

In every age, however, those who want to follow Jesus have a hard time reading and following the Sermon on the Mount. But that struggle has to be a good thing! Without going into a full treatment of Bonhoeffer this morning, let me say, first,

that the mere fact of struggling with the hard sayings of Jesus is a good thing.

Some people don't seem to struggle at all with the sayings of Jesus. Some people don't seem to find it hard to be a Christian at all. I hope that we are in church today because we do take Jesus seriously, and because we do take Christianity seriously. And it is hard, so very difficult, to be a Christian when we take Christianity seriously!

Christianity is indeed difficult for people who take it seriously!

If Christianity is just a label for you, well, fine. That's pretty easy. If it is just a label, like being from Atlanta is a label, then being a Christian is pretty easy.

And if Christianity is just a political platform, well, fine. Political positions, in the long run, are pretty easy. They are ways of staking out a position and then getting on with life. If we say, for instance, well the Christian position is "pro-choice," then we tend to forget about it and go forward.

But I have always found Christianity to be more difficult than labels and political platforms. For some reason or another, I have taken Christianity more seriously than that. Maybe that's because I actually like to read the Bible. I didn't skip over the parts like we heard today, from the gospel of Matthew.

Listening to Jesus is hard. Following Jesus is difficult. These passages from the Sermon on the Mount are incredibly difficult to live up to.

However, these hard sayings of Jesus deserve reflection and interpretation. My first comment, then, is this: There is a difference between literal interpretation and spiritual interpretation. Some of these sayings of Jesus simply cannot be taken legalistically and literally. In our system of morality, there is indeed a difference between thinking something and doing something. In our system of law, there is indeed a difference between having a desire to do something and acting on that desire. Imagining that I sure would like to strike some person is not the same, legally, as actually striking that person. Our system of civilization depends upon that distinction!

It *is* much worse to commit murder than it is to be angry. It *is* much worse to commit adultery than it is to have lust in your heart. It is *not* better to cut off your hand if it offends you. It is *not* better to gouge out your eye if it offends you. If we all took such verses literally, we would all be walking around as one-handed, one-eyed, and very demented, blind disciples of Jesus. We would be Hazel Motes.

On the other hand, my second comment is this: These sayings of Jesus *do* mean something morally and spiritually. They mean this: the Christian disciple is called to cultivate an interior life, a reflective life, an intentional life. What goes on in our mind is important. What we imagine is important. What goes in our soul is important. We are called to have a soul life.

It was Pablo Picasso, the artist, who said, "Everything you can imagine is real." At a spiritual level, too, what we imagine can be very real. What we imagine can shape how we act, and how we create. Therefore, these "Sermon on the Mount sayings" of Jesus do speak to my soul. They advise me to think about the good, to imagine the good.

The teachings of Jesus are about how to shape our souls. And that is hard work. Christianity is soul work. It is action work, too, of course! But it begins, and ends with soul work! Being a Christian is hard!

In the end, it is soul that creates our imagination. That's really the main thing I want to say in this sermon today. The Sermon on the Mount, and these quite difficult verses, are about how to guide our imagination. They are about how to train our imagination. These teachings of Jesus are teaching us how to imagine. Even the modern physicist, Albert Einstein would say (after Jesus!) "Logic will get you from A to Z. Imagination will get you everywhere."

If we can imagine the good, great things and great relationships (great righteousness!), and great peace, then we will be able to make those visions come true. On the other hand, if we imagine the bad, and if we dwell on the angry and the violent and the sinful, then it's almost as if they have come true, already, too. Anger can indeed be just as spiritually vicious as murder. Lust can indeed be just as spiritually vicious as adultery.

Let me end with Mark Twain again. Mark Twain said, "You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of

focus.” For us, listening to Jesus is about training our imaginations. Listening to Jesus, as hard as it is sometimes, is about imagining something beautiful and great: the kingdom of God.

AMEN.

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