

## Sunday of the Sixth Week in Ordinary Time/Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee

How many of you have ever struggled with Christian faith, with Christian believing?

O.K. How many of you have every struggled with Christian *living*, with how you go about living life in faithfulness to the Gospel?

The gospel readings for both the Roman liturgy and the Byzantine liturgy for today are about just this- about what *living rightly* in relationship to God looks like. But when I first read them earlier this week, they looked so different from one another that it was like looking at the perfect storm- a clash of what seemed like two very conflicting discourses of Jesus coming together on the same day. You heard one of the gospel reading, but not the other one, so I'll summarize both:

**Byzantine:** the parable of the publican and Pharisee, in which Jesus is extolling the attitude of the publican who is quite clear that his living, his righteousness, does not match up to that of the Pharisee and so his only response to that reality is to ask God for mercy.

**Roman:** A discourse in which Jesus tells his disciples that if they are to enter the kingdom of heaven, their righteousness needs to *surpass* that of the scribes and Pharisees, after which he proceeds to give several examples of what that looks like.

How does one put those two things together, especially on the same Sunday? As I began thinking about the two readings, I started to panic as to what to do with them in relation to one another. It gradually dawned on me, however, that what these two discourses of Jesus present us with are two of the boundaries within which we live our lives as disciples of Jesus.

On the one hand, when we come before God, we can never make claims on Him on the basis of the successfulness of our lives. If we try to put God somehow in our debt by trying to make ourselves "good enough for him" (whatever that might mean), we are surely going to make matters worse. When someone determinedly tries to show God (or other people) how good he or she is (like the Pharisee did in the parable), that person is likely to be become in insufferable prig. I certainly prefer to be around people who know perfectly well that they aren't good enough for God but are humbly grateful that God loves them anyway. Self-righteous religious people (and maybe we have all been there at some point), people who are convinced that they have made it to God's standard and can only look down on the rest of us from a lofty moral mountaintop are really not nice to be around.

What makes matters even worse in the parable is the basis on which the Pharisee claims his superior status to bad guys- to extortioners, the unjust, adulterers, and the tax collector.- it's his fidelity to ritual observance- 'I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' What would a contemporary equivalent of that look like? It's dangerous

to begin actually applying Jesus' parable to ourselves, but may need to: It might look something like this: I thank you God that I am not like all these slackers and cafeteria Catholics: I observe abstinence on Fridays, I keep all the rubrics of the *General Instruction on the Liturgy*, I don't wear blue during Advent. And I give generously to the Annual Appeal.

The parable of the publican and the Pharisee seems to contain that radical insight into what it means to be human and what it means to have the overwhelming mercy and love of God take hold of us precisely because we *cannot* pull ourselves up to God's moral standard by our own efforts, we *cannot* make ourselves fit for God. This, it seems to me, is what the parable is about- recognizing our "unfitness" and then trusting and relying on the gratuitous and undeserved mercy of God. Jesus commends this attitude:

*"And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'*

*I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

This is one side of Christian life that needs always to be part of the way we live and way we stand before God. And yet, Christian life can't stop at that point, We can't shrug our shoulders and give up the struggle to live the life the Kingdom to which Jesus calls us. And this is where the gospel reading from the Roman liturgy comes into play.

Jesus says to His disciples: your righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees if you are to be a part of my coming Kingdom. This saying of His, and its surrounding commentary, were undoubtedly included by Matthew in his gospel as a response to criticism from the synagogue that the Christian community had abandoned the Torah, the Law, something that would have excluded them from any claim to being the People of God. But Jesus insists that He has *not* come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to *fulfill* them. In Matthew's gospel, "to fulfill" the Law and the Prophets means to "carry out what God wants", and according to Jesus what God wants is for His Torah to be read and interpreted and lived through the lens of what is at the heart, the center, of the Law: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments," Jesus says, "depend all the law and the prophets" (22:37-40).

To live out the Torah interpreted in this way was to practice righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees. But rather than giving a treatise on what this looks like, Jesus cites six examples, six antitheses (we have four of them in today's reading). In each of these antitheses, Jesus contrasts what was said in "ancient times"- sometimes what the Torah itself said- with what He is *now saying to His disciples*. No rabbi or scribe ever contrasted his own pronouncements with what God had said in the Torah, but Jesus does.

Jesus is not content with a kind of external conformity to a saying, to a Law. He is concerned to get to its root, its heart, in order to show what it is that God is really like and what God is really asking of us, because Jesus knows that in itself the Law is not capable of regulating the inner springs of human conduct. And so, like the prophets before Him, Jesus is not giving us new laws. He is declaring the unqualified will of God, the ultimate *intent* of the Torah.

All six antitheses that Jesus uses are concrete examples of what the second Great Commandment looks like, when we love our neighbor like we love ourselves. All six are about what human relationships look like when it is love that governs them:

- You have heard it said long ago, “Do not murder”, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you anyone who is angry with his brother/sister will be subject to judgment. **Love shows no hostility.**
- You have heard it said, “Do not commit adultery”. But I say to you anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. **Love is not predatory.**
- It has been said, “Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.” But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for adultery, causes her to commit adultery. **Love is faithful. In a patriarchal world, it means that you don’t toss out a wife like a piece of unwanted property.**
- You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.” But I tell you, Do not swear at all. . . let your “Yes” be “Yes” and your “No”, “No”. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one. **Love is unconditionally truthful.**

[and then the two not included in today’s lectionary reading]

- You have heard that it was said, “Eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth”. But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. **Love does not retaliate.**
- You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy”. But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. **Love extends to the enemy.**

When Jesus tells his disciples that their righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, He was telling them that they are called to be like God Himself in how they live- “be perfect/complete”, He says at the end of these examples, “just as your heavenly Father is perfect/complete”. And this “perfection/completeness” is summed up in one word, “love”.

This is the other side, the other boundary, of Christian life. On the one hand, we always stand before God empty-handed, making no claims, only asking for mercy. On the other hand, we are called by Jesus to mirror, to reflect, the face of God, to give priority always to love, to compassion, to generosity and to mercy in dealing with others. The “perfect storm”. May we all be pulled into its vortex!

- Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden. Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today*.
- N.T. Wright, *After You Believe. Why Christian Character Matters*.
- M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew", *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8.