

Epiphany 6A: Matthew 5:17-37
Church of the Good Shepherd
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February 12, 2023

If someone was called a ‘radical, what’s the picture that comes to mind? Berkeley students holding antiwar placards? Terrorism attacks by the Weather Underground, maybe? Or perhaps more recently, the riots incited by Antifa or the environmental activists who throw paint on priceless paintings? I’ll bet you it’s not Jesus you’d be thinking about. Jesus, the radical? Radicals throw Molotov cocktails at police and stage sit-ins and take over the town square. Jesus, he issues comforting and reasonable sounding teachings like the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who mourn.” That just does not strike us as all that radical.

Yet, the difficulty we have connecting ‘Jesus’ and ‘radical’ has as much to do, I’ll argue, with our misunderstanding of the word ‘radical,’ as it does with our misunderstanding of the mission of Jesus.

You see, being ‘radical,’ to take the first term, isn’t about taking extreme political positions or adopting offensive tactics to press one’s agenda. It’s about getting to the root. You see, radical comes from the Latin word *radix*, meaning root. It’s the same word we get radish from: radish is a root. To be radical then is to get at the root, to what is at the bottom of something, at the foundation or below the foundation.

You don’t often get to see the roots of something, but sometimes you do. For instance, if you visit the 9/11 Museum in New York City, you will go underground to what is referred to as the “bathtub” where the foundations of the World Trade Center were. There you see a giant retaining wall with tie-backs into the concrete to hold back the nearby Hudson River. Those deep walls and foundations were the *radix*, the root of the World Trade Center Twin Towers, though they were never seen by anyone above ground. But they were more than a little important and are the only surviving pieces of those demolished skyscrapers. The root, the *radix*, the foundation of those buildings still remains.

Now, if radical means to get at the root of something, there are two directions you can go from there—The first involves overturning or pulling out the root, which is what those who are called ‘radicals’ today seek. They want to pull institutions, norms and the like, down to the root, so they can build something they believe will be better. But another meaning of radical is captured by the phrase “*getting back* to one’s roots.” That is, to return to the foundations, the root of a political system, a religious belief system, etc.—to get back to what it was intended to be in the beginning. That’s what it means, that’s why you can call Jesus a radical—he wants to get back to the roots of religion, of living in faith towards the Lord.

You see this in this morning’s Gospel lesson from Matthew. Jesus here is “radicalizing” God’s Law, pointing everyone’s attention back to the basics and the root origin of God’s commands. Jesus wants us to go underground to see what has been holding up this whole structure of the Law from the beginning so that we might understand things afresh.

Now, that's not what it sounds like, at least not the first time you hear it. No, from the outside looking in, it looks like Jesus is making the Law of God ridiculously hard to keep. It looks like he's turning the Law into something different, something harder and more difficult.

"You haven't slept with anyone besides your wife? Good for you. You want a prize for that? But you did look at your co-worker Jill and think about it. So you evidently didn't understand the point of that 'Do not commit adultery' command, which is just as bad in God's eye's."

"So you haven't stabbed someone or shoved someone to his death off a cliff? You must be mighty proud of yourself. The problem is, when you got angry last week and told your obnoxious neighbor to go take a flying leap, to God you managed to snap the 'Do not murder' command quite cleanly in two in your life."

"Oh, you haven't sworn a false oath in God's name? Well, whoop-tee-doo! Who swears by the Temple or the altar or by Jerusalem *these days*? But when you knowingly lied to your boss about what you did while attending the convention, then in God's eyes the 'Do not give false witness' command died a sudden death."

Tough stuff. Tougher in its way than just not sinning by not murdering, committing adultery or swearing.

But does this mean Jesus is changing the Law into something new and different? No, he is not. Rather, what Jesus is doing is "radicalizing" it, he is bringing everyone back to the roots of why God gave the Law in the first place. He's getting at the psychology of the Law, we might say, at the thinking behind the acts, our motivations, not just the outward actions. Of course, external behavior and actual deeds are always worse, always more injurious than secret fantasies. I mean, it's one thing, when you are having a drink with a coworker, to be tempted by an invitation to go home with her, but it's another to actually spend the night. And only a very careless person would equate getting angry at someone with putting them in the hospital. If that were true, then you might as well have the affair or run the person over with a car while you're at it. That is not Jesus' point here.

So what is the point, the point of this radicalizing of the Law? The point is that the Law of God was meant to foster righteousness, right living, not just in our actions but also in our hearts and minds. God wants us to respect each other, to love each other, to see God's own image residing deep within one another. He wants us to deal with conflict directly, honestly, without violence and without dehumanizing each other. Human life is not supposed to be some giant game in which you scheme and scam to get ahead. We are not to use people as pawns, as instruments of self-satisfaction, or objects for our scorn, the targets for our desires to brutalize, manipulate, and then discard.

It's not enough that we don't express these attitudes in concrete actions, God doesn't want us to have the attitudes either. The goal is an integrated life, with our inner selves matching our outer selves. The opposite, acting publicly one way and feeling and thinking another, is the definition of hypocrisy. That word comes from the *hypokrites*, the Greek actors who would wear masks to signify which characters they were playing. When we do one thing but in our hearts desire

another, or when we put on a façade to make ourselves look good, better than we are, that's hypocrisy, acting. It's what we call today "virtue signaling," claiming to be more moral than we are, acting the part but knowing it's just a mask, an image we want to project.

The reality is, hypocrisy isn't what it's cracked up to be. Sooner or later, our masks have a way of cracking, showing the real us. But even before it does, living life behind a mask has a way of brutalizing the soul. In the *Inferno*, the poet Dante describes a clever punishment in Hell for hypocrites: they were clothed with elaborate and resplendent golden garments yet the garments were lined with lead. To wear this attire every day literally weighed the person down with weariness and an unending sense of burdensome heaviness. That is what acting holy but at the same time carrying around anger and lust and deception does to us on the inside: it weighs us down, saps our joy. And sooner or later it really will show up on the outside in how we treat others, talk to them, regard them.

Of course, the root origin of God's Law is not all about human psychology or some me-focused program of self-improvement. It is at its root aimed at other people and at God himself. How do we see others? How do we treat them in our heart of hearts? Do we think it doesn't matter how furious we are at driver who cuts us off and then for good measure flips us the bird? Do we think it's good to nurse a grudge for years such that every time we see Sarah or Jeff our insides get tied up in knots and bile curdles in our gut? Do we think that that attractive guy or that fetching woman exists for our pleasure only? Do we think that this other person who just asked us a question is so worthless that he doesn't deserve the truth, so we will play God in his or her life by determining what they get to know?

Look, by getting back to the radix of the Law, the root, Jesus really does nail every last one of us. "Your righteousness should *exceed* that of the scribes and Pharisees," Jesus says—good luck with that one! We are all sufficiently mired in sin and selfishness that we know full well how easy it is to see ourselves in the pictures Jesus sketches. But Jesus is not just being tough on us: he is reminding us of a truth that is actually so very encouraging: God created us to flourish in his good creation. God wants all of us to flourish.

But as much as this truth can give us great hope, encouragement, it can also leave us distraught for we are not there yet and don't see how we can get there, not on our own. We have to reckon with the fact that we can't do it under our own power. As we prayed at the start of our service: "because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed." Here we see the larger function of Jesus' teachings on the Law: that the toughness of his teaching is aimed ultimately at casting us back to a reliance on grace, grace alone. The point of the toughness of Jesus' teaching is to make us realize our need for Jesus, for the cross, for grace.

Now by 'grace,' I don't mean that in the sense that we hear God's commands and throw our hands up, saying "Your laws, Lord, are too much for me. So I will just cry 'uncle' now (or rather Father)," and throw ourselves on God's forgiveness. That's weak, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls, 'cheap grace.' The grace of knowing you will fail and will be forgiven, so you don't even try. You take God's mercy for granted. That's like standing at the foot of the mountain and saying, I know I won't make it to the top, so I'm not even going to start, because I won't succeed

anyway. That's what we're saying when we say things like, Nobody's perfect, or I'm no saint, or We are all sinners, so what difference does it make. That's cheap grace.

This attitude fails to appreciate how even if we don't make it to the top of the mountain, we may find some wonderful views along the way. And to be honest, how do you know you won't make it, if you don't try. In the same way, Jesus isn't saying, Look at that grand mountain, it's great up there but I know you can't make it so you might as well give up. Rather, he invites us to embark on an adventure, to set off up the trail, into the Kingdom, to embark on a life lived a different way, to live as God wills, not as hypocrites but as persons of integrity and faith, trusting that we will become different people, better people for the journey. And even if we fail, when we fail, we know that God will bring us home. Grace, understood this way, isn't a consolation prize; it's the confidence, trust that you carry with you, that carries you, encouraging you as you do the hard work of striving to live godly lives.

It's funny, we started out talking about roots underground but we made it all the way to the top of a mountain. Jesus' teaching really does cover a lot! And in fact where we leave off is where we will find Jesus next week—at the top of a mountain. But it's enough right now for us to attend to the roots, the roots of God's Law, as Jesus shows us the heart of God's will for us and for the world and calls us to change our hearts, that we too might experience the new world, the new kingdom Jesus is bringing. Thanks be to God.