

Daily Discipleship

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (A) – Matthew 5:21-37

Discipleship: *Following the Spirit of the Law*

Focus Question: *How is a follower of Jesus called to live?*

word of life

“You have heard that it was said ... but I (Jesus) say to you ...” Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34 (NRSV)

Read Matthew 5:21-37

The fifth chapter of Matthew is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon follows the call of the disciples (Matthew 4:18-22) and provides a handbook for discipleship. The sermon begins with comforting, peaceful, eloquent language—“Blessed are the poor in spirit ... Blessed are those who mourn ... Blessed are the peacemakers”—words of assurance and promise. The sermon continued in last week’s reading: “You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before others.” These are a bit more challenging words, but they still sound of comfort and hope. We are commissioned by Jesus to be salt and light.

1. *In what ways are these verses comforting?*
2. *In what ways are they challenging?*

But today’s verses are difficult to hear. Jesus goes beyond the letter of the commandments to examine our intentions and motives behind our actions. And things begin to hit close to home.

3. *What stirs inside us as we read Matthew 5:21-37*
4. *Why does Jesus need to get so personal?*

Jesus will be criticized by the Pharisees—the keepers of the Law—many times in Matthew’s gospel for his association with tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 9:11). He will be questioned about his seeming disregard for dietary laws and the keeping of the Sabbath (Matthew 9:14, 12:1-2). In today’s reading, he offers a radical interpretation of the Law and provides a grounding for later actions in his ministry.

Matthew 5:21-48 contains what is called the “antithesis” of the Sermon on the Mount. In this section, six times Jesus’ words about relationships in the community of the faithful followers – words about lust, anger, adultery, divorce, swearing – are held in contrast to a requirement of the Old Testament law. Each antithesis introduces a premise with the words, “You have heard that it was said,” and each is followed by an antithetical response, “But I say to you.”

5. *What would be a contemporary phrase that would convey the same intention as “you have heard it said, but I say to you”?*
6. *Do you find the repetition of this phrase helpful or not? Explain.*

Remember that Matthew is a “teaching Gospel.” Jesus is often called “Rabbi,” which means “Teacher.” As a teacher, Jesus calls for a radical reinterpretation of the commandments of the Law. He challenges his followers to go beyond a checklist of action to an examination of the heart. Following Jesus as a disciple is to look beyond the action to see the intention. And through this perspective, all have fallen short.

7. *Recall an example of looking beyond an action to the motivation of the person. Is this difficult to do? Why or why not?*
8. *How is a follower of Jesus called to live?*

word among us

It's time to say, "Yes." The temptation when we first hear these words of Jesus is to deny they are speaking to us. "I've never killed anyone; I've never committed adultery or been divorced. I (almost) never swear. So what does this have to do with me?" we might say.

The answer is, "Everything!" Who among us has not experienced a strained relationship with a family member or friend where we have hurt the other and cheapened the relationship? Who among us has not lashed out with words of anger (or deafening silence) against another?

1. *What makes it so difficult to live in relationship with others?*
2. *Many think Christian communities should be an easy place to be a Christian. Have you found that to be true or not? Explain.*

It's time to say, "Yes." Yes, we are in the midst of brokenness, each of us. God's will for our lives is to live in relationship with one another as a community in Christian love. And we know that we fail to live in that will. Even if our outward actions appear pure, our inward thoughts tell a different story. "We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves," we pray. Yes, we are sinners. That's the truth.

But it's not the whole truth. And it's time to say "Yes" to this greater truth – that the same Jesus who calls for a radical discipleship is one whose whole life and ministry was with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners. His life, death and resurrection are all about freeing us from the power of sin.

Somehow, we lose this "Yes" too often. We are quick to condemn, quick to judge, quick to point out the brokenness of others, quick to see our own sinfulness, but not so quick to hear the "Yes" of forgiveness for ourselves and for our neighbor.

3. *What is it about human nature that makes us more inclined to condemn, judge, and point to the sinfulness of others?*
4. *Why is it difficult to hear God's "yes" to us?*

It's time to say, "Yes." It's time to remember that our confession doesn't end with our saying, "Yes," to our brokenness. The final word spoken is God's "yes" to us. It's a word of forgiveness and grace: "Your sins are forgiven."

It has been said by some, "The church is to be a hotel for saints," but Jesus says to us, "I tell you, the church is a hospital for sinners, where all may know my forgiveness and grace."

YES, INDEED!

Prayer

Create in us clean hearts, O God, to say, "Yes," to our sin and an even greater, "Yes," to your forgiving love; through Christ our Lord. Amen

Dig Deeper

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

last word

Look for times
to say
"Yes."



Daily Discipleship

Written by John and Robin McCullough-Bade

Copyright © 2011 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

May be reproduced for local, non-sale use provided the above copyright notice is included.

www.elca.org/evangelizingchurch/dailydiscipleship

6 Epiphany (A) Page 2 of 2