

Smell tests

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 16, 2020

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, '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; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 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.

Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one. - Matthew 5:21-24,27-30,33-37

The Internal Revenue Service tax code includes some remarkable tax breaks for clergy, particularly clergy who own their own homes. These tax provisions go back to colonial times, and they have recently withstood court challenges by separation-of-church-and-state activists. I have significantly benefited from these laws in some of my own parish ministries.

One time in another parish our family was planning some big home improvements. I calculated how I could use the clergy tax law to avoid all income tax for a year, or maybe two. But first, I had to run the plan past the vestry, starting with the senior warden. When I explained my scheme to her, she paused for a bit, and then she said, "*Well, Patrick, even if it is legal I'm not sure your idea passes the smell test.*" We all know what it's like to smell the opening of a milk carton before pouring, and to learn that it's gone bad. I decided not to go there.

But as I prepared to share this story with you, I realized that I never exactly dissected why I decided not to "go there." I can now see that the factors in play were mostly intangible. I can also see that it was mostly about relationships. I respected the senior warden, and her stature in the congregation and her wisdom. I also didn't want to put at risk the trust that I felt the congregation as a whole had placed in me. So, even though what I proposed was perfectly legal under the law, I came to share the warden's sense that it didn't pass the smell test.

Jesus arguably invokes the smell test in the three exhortations from the Sermon on the Mount that make up today's appointed gospel text. In each case, Jesus examines ways that we can give off a bad odor, as it were – even when we are, technically speaking, following the letter of the law – with regard to murder, adultery and lying.

Murder is clearly a violation of the law, Jesus recognizes. Of course we should avoid it *But don't underestimate all of the sorrowful big and little deaths that you inflict when you have a murderous*

heart. When you've harmed someone, take it seriously. Examine yourself in light of the unfailing goodness and mercy that God has shown you. Do your best to seek repair.

You may or may not have a paramour with whom you've checked into some sleazy motel-by-the-hour. And you may feel smug for having avoided adultery—at least technically. But you know the duplicity of the human heart. Make sure in every intention and action and glance that you are not excommunicating the beloved to whom you have ostensibly given your heart. Take drastic measures, if you need to, to keep that bond sacred.

Beware of what you say you will or will not do, especially in the name of God. Trying to live exactly by the small print of your script may drive you or others crazy. Saying that you have a mandate or an endorsement from God can make things worse. Aim high, but don't be a control freak. Stay curious and flexible. Whenever you can, stick to a simple yes or no.

Jesus, of course, never used the language of smell tests. You won't find it in the Bible or any credible theology. But Jesus seems to be applying something like it in three instances in today's gospel. He is giving us a whiff of what can go bad when the purity of law and its intentions are sullied by our human conniving and rationalizing and looking for loopholes.

St. Paul later examined similar territory in one of the best-known passages in his Letter to the Romans. He compares and contrasts living “according to the flesh” and living “according to the Spirit.” (Romans, Chapter 8)

And long before Paul or Jesus, the prophets of Israel were sniffing out the same territory. On Ash Wednesday, for example, we will hear from Isaiah. He will remind us that religious piety without humility and justice will get us nowhere: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice ... to let the oppressed go free? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry ... [and] when you see the naked, to cover them? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.” (excerpted from Isaiah 58:6-8)

In our time, Isaiah might have added: *Don't imagine that giving up chocolate, or even your most impeccable Lenten disciplines, will get you anywhere with God. We must begin with broken hearts and humility and willingness to seek and name and be God's justice.*

Perhaps we should take a moment here to be reminded that law – whether the Law of Moses or our own present civil law –*can* be a gift. Law at its best can plant and keep alive in our hearts fundamental notions of right and wrong. Law at its best can bring to light the life-giving or harmful consequences of our choices. Law at its best serves the good of the whole. And law at its best safeguards the weakest members of a nation, a community or a household. All of this is worth mentioning here because nowhere in the gospels does Jesus show a more positive regard for the law than in the Sermon on the Mount, including the portions of it we hear today.

In response, some of us may wonder if we are due for a smell test, a worthy response. But we should beware of shame if that smell test results in recognizing what has gone bad. Shame would be a natural response. But it's not where Jesus hopes to lead us. He is aiming for what lies beyond our shame – our hope for and our willingness to pursue or restore right relationships, with God, ourselves and others.

Where do we begin? *Amen.*