

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 12, 2017

Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year A: Ecclesiastius 15:11–20; Psalm 119:9–16; 1 Corinthians 3:1–9; Matthew 5:21–37**

The Sermon on the Mount is by far the longest of the five sermons given by Jesus in Matthew's gospel.

Today's gospel is from the middle of what we call the fifth chapter; the sermon goes on for two more chapters. Today we heard four of the six verses called, "antitheses;" we will hear the next two next Sunday.¹ These antitheses begin, "You have heard that it was said." Jesus then continues with, "But I say to you."²

Jesus is on a mountain, but it's not Horeb or Sinai. The mountain setting is important. He's already proclaimed in this sermon that he's not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but that he fulfills the words of both.³

The writing and preaching on this sermon has been voluminous since antiquity. The Protestant Reformation added more volumes in its own direction. It's worth noting that Christian communities have

¹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 228.

² Matthew 5:31–32, 38–39, 43–44.

³ Matthew 5:17.

never taken literally the words of Jesus in Mark and Matthew about extracting an eye or cutting off the hand one uses for eating.⁴ That said, Christians are sometimes more than ready to take the words of Jesus literally, sometimes for the sake of what they believe is true, sometimes for the sake of power, and sometimes because we are afraid.

Father Raymond Brown in his book *An Introduction to the New Testament*, writing about divorce and sexuality asserts that, “Paul and indeed, Jesus himself , walking among us in our times, would not be frightened by being considered sexually and politically ‘incorrect,’ any more than they minded being considered overly demanding in the Greco-Roman and Jewish world of their times.”⁵ With great respect to the late Father Brown, I don’t think that’s a fair way to frame the issues of our time.

It’s interesting that the famous gospel appointed for the Jesus’ last supper is from John, the gospel with no words about bread and body, wine and blood. The appointed (and traditional) passage is about

⁴ Mark 9:43–47.

⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 530.

relationship among Jesus' disciples. We hear words about washing one another's feet and about loving one another.⁶ The New Testament reading that night is from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians—words about the bread and the wine, the Body and the Blood of the Lord. But I wonder how Christian life history might be different, if instead of hearing so much about the bread and the wine, we heard on Maundy Thursday New Testament words that echo the great commandment the Lord gave to the men and women he began that night to call friends, the command to love one another as he had loved them.⁷ May I respectfully suggest, as others have,⁸ that it would be good to hear instead a passage like this from the First Letter of John—not by the evangelist, but from his tradition:⁹

This is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another . . . By this we know love, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us . . . But if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart

⁶ John 13:1–15.

⁷ John 13:34.

⁸ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-10/what-s-text>, (Accessed 11 February 2017).

⁹ Brown, 383.

against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth.¹⁰

Jesus' words about anger, reconciliation, adultery, divorce, and swearing grow out of, and are framed, as it were, by the culture of his time and community. We think about many things differently in our time—sickness, demonic possession, slavery, the legal status of women, and equality.

The other day I saw a picture of a dean of an Episcopal cathedral celebrating the Eucharist with the kind of trays of small cups I knew from my Southern Baptist days. My mind went quickly to a place of judgment, but my adult self took over pretty quickly. If I were her bishop, I might have a reason to inquire about what she was doing, but I have enough to worry about.

I can remember very well that after I became an Episcopalian, I would still attend from time to time the Southern Baptist church where my uncle was senior pastor. If it was the first Sunday of the month, I took communion along with everyone else. (I wouldn't

¹⁰ 1 John 3:16–18.

be wearing clericals out of respect for my Baptist heritage.) I couldn't say, then or now, that the Lord was absent from that supper the baptized shared in his name.

I hope I will continue to learn to love more fully the people and the world in which I live. To see and to hear the truth, and to follow it.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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