

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 16, 2020

The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

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

You may remember our Sunday lectionary is on a three-year cycle—and this is the year when most Sundays the gospel lesson is from Matthew. Saint Augustine of Hippo is credited with calling the first and longest of Jesus’ five discourses in Matthew, from which today’s gospel lesson is taken, the “Sermon on the Mount.”¹ New Testament scholar Ulrich Luz calls it “a happy choice” because it reminds us of Moses going up to Mount Sinai and receiving the tablets of the law²—and since we are talking about the Sermon on the Mount, it’s worth noting that Luz is among the scholars who think the Greek word usually translated as “blessed” is better, but not perfectly, translated as “happy.”³

Three years ago, when I was working with Luz’s commentary on this lesson, I put a question mark by a comment he made in a footnote on his introduction to this sermon. He wrote that this first discourse was

¹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 177.

² “*Sermone Domini in Monte*,” *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 185, 190.

meant to be read as a complete text, not heard aloud as a lectionary reading.⁴ Working with it again, I now appreciate his point. A good copy editor would try to talk the evangelist into breaking it up into several sermons. But it comes to us as a unit—one discourse.

The mountain may give the sermon its name, but Professor Luz says the point of the sermon, of almost 2400 words in English translation, is better described as a “Discourse on the Righteousness of the Kingdom of Heaven.”⁵ For Matthew, “righteousness” is about the conduct in this life that prepares one to be ready for the life of the world to come, to be acceptable for the kingdom of heaven.⁶

Today we heard the first four of six antitheses—opposites—what is right or what is wrong. Daniel Harrington described them in his commentary on Matthew in this way: “murder and anger, adultery and lust, divorce [and remarriage], [and making and breaking] oaths.”⁷

⁴ Ibid., 172, n.2.

⁵ Ibid., 177.

⁶ Gottlob Schrenk, “*δικαιοσύνη*, in the non-Pauline Writings of the NT,” *Theological Dictionary of New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, trans. and ed. G.W. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1964–1976), II:198–99.

⁷ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 92.

The lectionary reserves two for next Sunday: “responding to evil”—not an eye for an eye, but turn the other cheek, “give to whoever asks you,”⁸ and “loving friends and enemies.”⁹ (But, if I’ve checked correctly, we will not hear this passage on a Sunday until 2038.)

The customary English wording of the conclusion of all six antitheses is this, “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”¹⁰ Mark, Luke, and John never use the Greek word translated here as “perfect,” *téleios*. I prefer Dr. Mark Davis’s translation of *téleios* as “complete.”¹¹ Thus, “Therefore you will be complete as your father in heaven is complete.”¹² Matthew’s Jesus is about choices we make in relationship to God and to other people.

I want to read the verse just before our gospel lesson begins—it was the final verse of last week’s gospel: Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “unless

⁸ Ibid., 86.

⁹ Ibid., 92.

¹⁰ RSV Matthew 5:48.

¹¹ <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/02/be-perfect-as-nature-is-perfect.html> (Accessed 19 February 2017). See also *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), *s.v.* “*téleios*,” 995–96; “*téleióω*,” 996.

¹² Ibid.

your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”¹³

So, murder isn't the root problem. Anger is. Jesus places a high value on reconciliation where there is strife, enmity.

Adultery is not the root problem. For Jesus, it's the lust of desire—where what one chooses to see and to touch can turn a person away from a spouse and from God—the position of women in Matthew is a large, and largely sad, subject for another time.

Divorce and remarriage have never been easy subjects. There's not a family that hasn't been touched by them. Countless are the women and men who have been oppressed by the application of standards of that are not grounded in mercy, but instead in sacrifice.

Moving on. By the time Matthew wrote, Christian communities knew apostasy—baptized people, turning away, for whatever reason, from their commitment to Christ. The psalmist says, “Make a vow to the Lord

¹³ Matthew 5:20.

your God and keep it.”¹⁴ I think this is behind Jesus’ words about not swearing.

Very explicitly in Matthew, Jesus is the new fulfilment of the law. Joseph learned this in a dream, when he was told Mary’s child was to be named, Joshua—Jesus. A footnote in my annotated version of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible says, “The Hebrew and Aramaic forms of *Jesus* and *he will save* are similar. The point could be suggested by translating [Jesus as], “You shall call his name ‘Savior’ because he will save.”¹⁵ The evangelist explains, “This took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel’ (which means, God with us).”¹⁶

Later in the gospel, in Jerusalem, in the temple, Jesus will be speaking to other crowds and to his disciples. He will not be so shy about his identity but he will not be believed. He will say, “You have one teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters . . . call no [one] your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.

¹⁴ Psalm 76:11.

¹⁵ *The Oxford Annotated The Apocrypha of the Old Testament Revised Standard Version Expanded Edition containing the Third and Fourth Books of the Maccabees and Psalm 151*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1172, n.21.

¹⁶ Matthew 1:22–23.

Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ.”¹⁷

At the same time Matthew is writing, I think it’s probably correct that the communities of Gentile Christians have already become more numerous than the communities of Jewish Christians. I can’t help but think that these words that Paul wrote to the Galatians were known to Matthew, one way or another, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love.”¹⁸

When I was working with the late Rabbi Edwin Friedman in his Bowen Family Systems Theory workshops, he would say (with more colorful language), “Ignore your feelings; do what you know is right.” That’s not a bad summary of Jesus’ words on the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven.

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

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¹⁷ Matthew 23:8–10. The word “man” is a convention of English translation and does not appear in the Greek text.

¹⁸ Galatians 5:6.