

Homily for Saturday in the Second Week after Pentecost

June 13, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 2, Proper 5: 1 Kings 19:19–21; Psalm 16:1–4; Matthew 5:33–37*

Yesterday, I introduced my thoughts about the appointed passage in the First Book of the Kings by telling the story that we didn't hear this week because of the appointed commemorations. Today I want to do something of the same thing. On Monday, our gospel was the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. It's the longest of five sermons Jesus gives in Matthew. Except on days when we have commemorations, our gospel lessons will be from this sermon for most of the next two weeks.

The sermon begins with Jesus and his disciples going up on the mountain and seeing the crowds. He says, "Happy are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them."¹ After the beatitudes, there are words about people being the salt and the light of the world. Jesus proclaims he has not come to annul the law and the prophets but to fulfill them. Then we hear a series of antitheses—opposites.

¹ Matthew 5:3. Translation: Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 185.

The first is on killing. Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to the ancients: ‘You shall not kill.’ But I say to you: Everyone who is angry with his brother shall meet judgment.”²

The second is on adultery: “You have heard that it was said: ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you Everyone who looks at a woman with desire has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”³

The next words, about divorce, is, to use words from a title of a book by Phyllis Tribble, a “text of terror.”⁴ In Matthew we hear, “But it was said: ‘Whoever dismisses his wife must give her a bill of divorce.’ But I say to you: Everyone who dismisses his wife, except for a matter of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a dismissed woman commits adultery.”⁵

Professor Ulrich Luz, in his commentary on Matthew, writes, “There is no further thought given to the situation of the women, who are essentially objects of marriage, of divorce, and even of adultery.”⁶

² Matthew 5:21–22a. Ibid., 233.

³ Matthew 5:27–28. Ibid., 242.

⁴ Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

⁵ Matthew 5:31–32. Ibid., 250.

⁶ Luz, 251.

The vast majority of Christians are still burdened by denominational doctrines that show little mercy for married couples who feel called to be divorced and to move on with their lives. Orthodox Jewish women are burdened in the same way. And now we come today's lesson, the antithesis on swearing.

In the Letter to James, quite possibly written in the same decade as Matthew's gospel, we read, "But above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, that you may not fall under condemnation."⁷

Raymond Brown, in his *An Introduction to the New Testament*, lists fifteen teachings in the Letter to James that have parallels in the Sermon on the Mount.⁸ He wrote, "Notice that despite the closeness of theme, neither the wording of the parallels nor the order in which they appear are the same. Accordingly most scholars think that the writer of James knew not Matthew but a Jesus tradition of the type that Matthew knew."⁹

⁷ James 5:12.

⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 734–35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 735.

The psalmist says, “Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and Make good your vows to the Most High.”¹⁰ Both in James and in Matthew we have a teaching that takes us to Jesus’ word for us. The law and the prophets are one thing. Jesus has revealed that all creation is in a new place: “the dominion of heaven is at hand.”¹¹

Jesus’ authority resides in his own words. Luz puts it this way, “They are trusted to have the power to be obvious to the hearer and to make new people of them.”¹² Behind today’s gospel passage is that Christians are called to be people of truth, just one of the commandments our Jewish forebears were given taught, “You shall not be a false witness.”¹³

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

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¹⁰ Psalm 50:14. *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 655.

¹¹ Matthew 4:17. My translation.

¹² Luz, 251.

¹³ BCP, 350.