

Is it still Epiphany? Yes, it is. Easter is late this year, so we get an extended Epiphany season. And since this is the year that our Gospel readings come from Matthew, a long Epiphany means lots of readings from the Sermon on the Mount.

We're in the midst of numerous weeks of readings from the Sermon on the Mount.

To step back for a minute: Matthew, more than any other Gospel writer, wants us to see Jesus in Jewish terms, coming from a Jewish context. Early on Jesus repeats some of the history of the Jewish people in his own life. In Matthew, there's a guy named Joseph who has dreams, just like the Joseph in the Old Testament. A psychotic king Herod tries to kill all baby boys of Bethlehem, just like Pharaoh did in the time of baby Moses. Baby Jesus spends time in Egypt, just like the Hebrew people did. And he begins his ministry with 40 days in the wilderness, a reminder of the Hebrews spending 40 years in the wilderness.

And then Jesus begins his teaching ministry extended series of teachings that we label, "The Sermon on the Mount." Jesus goes up a mountain and sits down and begins to teach. By this time in Matthew, it's supposed to remind of us of another figure, Moses, who went up a mountain, and came back down with God's commandments. Yes, Matthew very much wants us to see Jesus as a new Moses. Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is a prophet like Moses. And he's also a prophet greater than Moses. Moses received the Law from God and passed it on to the people. Jesus speaks with his own authority, and gives the law in a new way.

In fact, our Gospel lessons today and next week are part of a section called the "antitheses." Six times Jesus says, "You have heard it said..." and then he quotes part of the Law of Moses. Then he says, "But I say to you..." and then he gives a new interpretation. He takes the law, and he ratchets it up to a higher level.

In his first of these statements, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'..."

Sure, I've heard that before—it's one of the 10 Commandments. No murder.

But you know, so far I've gone over 53 years without committing murder. My record is clean. I've never killed anyone.

So I can relax. Doesn't really apply too much to me.

So when Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said... 'You shall not murder'" I don't worry too much about it. But Jesus brings the zinger.

"You have heard that it was said... 'You shall not murder.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment."

This makes me sit up and pay attention.

'You shall not murder.' I feel safe.

'Don't be angry either.' That hits home, for I have been angry.

Now the kind of anger Jesus is talking about is not the kind of anger you might have in a burst of temper. There is a Greek word for anger that we might translate into 'rage' or 'outburst.' The word *thymós*. It sounds rather quick: *thymós*. But that's not the word used here.

Instead the word for anger in this passage is the word for anger which is nurtured. The word is *orgizómenos*. That word even sounds like anger you're stewing over: *orgizómenos*. This is not a sudden rage, but anger which seethes and broods and bubbles. Jesus says this kind of anger destroys, this kind of anger kills. It may not kill literally. But it will destroy community, and will kill healthy relationships.

Jesus got angry—after all he overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple and drove them out with a whip. But that kind of anger, that kind of righteous indignation is anger which brings change. Instead the seething anger which Jesus warns us about in today's reading is anger that leads to spiritual danger.

Having anger is a natural part of being human. But Jesus tells us, don't nurse your anger, don't nurture your anger, don't hold on to your anger, for doing so leads you down a destructive spiritual path.

In the same way, Jesus says, "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."

Just as with anger, sexual attraction has its place. Yet we need to be careful to make sure that we use our sexuality in ways that are life-giving, and not life-destroying.

Sex can be a wonderful and joyful component of loving, intimate human relationships. And sexual attraction is natural, it's part of being human. But, as with anger, Jesus says be careful, don't nurse your lust.

We all know that uncontrolled lust can damage or even destroy human relationships, and leave pain and anguish in its wake. One theologian writes, "Sex is like nitroglycerin, it can be used to heal hearts or blow up bridges."<sup>1</sup>

Recently Renee and I have been binge-watching nine seasons of a sit-com from earlier in this century. The show is *How I Met Your Mother*. The show follows a group of 5 friends. One of them is a lovable yet extremely sleazy womanizer named Barney. Barney's main goal in life is to pursue and sleep with as many women as he possibly can, and then to get rid of them as quickly as possible. He is so sleazy that one of his best friends refers to him as a "high functioning sociopath."

But part of the joy of *How I Met Your Mother* has been to watch Barney's growth. Barney moves from using other people selfishly to meet his own needs to seeking to meet someone else's needs selflessly.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*

In fact, at one point towards the end, Barney finally admits, "For a long time, deep down, I've felt sort of broken, but I don't feel that way anymore."

In the end Barney will go from using others simply to satisfy his lust to being capable of truly loving another.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not calling us to obey some arbitrary set rules. He's not asking us to observe the letter of the law, but rather its spirit.

Thus Jesus takes the old statements of the law, which are just simple prohibitions against certain behaviors, and makes them much deeper. He makes them calls to live more and more in God's ways.

We have been created with human bodies and human emotions—they are gifts from God and are to be used and acknowledged and affirmed. But we're not to let them rule our lives. We're to use them in life giving ways, not in destructive ways.

Jesus is addressing us as complex human beings. Jesus is acknowledging that there is more to us than just our animal nature. If we were merely creatures of flesh, then the law would be enough, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery." But we also have a different nature, a nature as citizens of the kingdom. Jesus wants all of us. Jesus wants the whole person, animal and divine, flesh and spirit. Jesus calls us to live in a different way, not out of fear of punishment, but out of a desire to live into the fullness of what God has created us to be.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus functions as a new law-giver. He's not laying down new rules to restrict our fun. He's giving us guidance to living fully human lives, to live into what God created us to be.

We heard in our OT lesson from Deuteronomy today that God's law is the path to life and prosperity. Elsewhere in scripture God's law is described as light and joy. It is something that provides direction and guidance and keeps you safe.

And this makes a certain amount of sense. A talented athlete can only truly excel if they pay attention to the rules of their sport. A great home run hitter needs to stay between the two foul poles to be successful. A great golfer may be able to drive a ball 300 yards, but it won't do much good unless the ball stays in bounds, or even better, in the fairway.

Thus the purpose of the law is not to spoil our fun. The purpose is to allow us to live together as God's people in the world. The purpose of the law is to help us live into who we are created to be as God's children. The purpose of the law is to help us forsake things that are destructive to ourselves, to others, or to human relationships and community.

Thus Jesus' teachings about the law are not about taking something tough and making it tougher. Jesus' teachings are about taking something good and making it even better. Instead of just living by the strict letter of the law, he invites us to live joyfully in the spirit of the law.

Jesus teachings are not about avoiding bad behavior out of fear of punishment. They are an invitation to live more fully, loving God, and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

In Matthew, Jesus is the new law-giver.  
And Jesus is the new life-bringer.

As our psalmist said,  
"Happy are they... who walk in the law of the Lord! Happy are they who observe his decrees and seek him with all their hearts!"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ps 119:1-2