

Richmond Hill
 Richmond, Virginia
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 6 Epiphany
 Matthew 5:21-37
 The Rev. B. P. Campbell

A Matter of the Heart

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. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

"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.

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

"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.

The roots of sin and evil go deep.

We are divided in our souls

Radical action is necessary. [You'd be willing to cut off arm to avoid hell]

The beginning is a change of heart:

In the context of forgiveness, honesty and prayer [metanoia] [renewal of mind]

1. The roots of sin and evil go deep. [We are divided in our souls.]

In these teachings from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus introduces his teaching about the source of good and evil in the world, and the depth of healing which we human beings need.

He begins with a statement which I have to think was a joke when he originally told it. He was discussing God, virtue, and the commandments, and the need to love God, talking to his twelve disciples. They were sitting there, feeling pretty good about

themselves. After all, they were fishermen and farmers, ordinary rural men, and Jesus had ordained them to be his deacons, his vestrymen, the members of his parish Council, his board of directors.

Then a beautiful woman walks by.

And after she passes, Jesus says to the disciples, "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."

No one escapes the indictment.

The same is true of the anger -- if you call someone a fool -- if you even feel that someone is a fool -- you are in danger of the fires of hell.

We cannot ignore the depth and severity of this teaching. It is the hinge on which the teaching of Jesus swings. Unless we get this, there is no reason to go to the trouble of listening to him, no reason to worry about salvation or healing, no reason to engage in the religious enterprise as He defines it.

The troubles of the world -- the hell which people cause each other, the injustice and evil and ugliness and self-centeredness of the society -- are rooted deep in the human soul, deep in the human heart. There is no avoiding the knowledge of their presence.

And therefore, we are divided beings if we care for virtue at all.

No doubt, the disciple's reaction to Jesus' observation about the woman who passed them, and the discussion of rage and anger, was to seek to justify themselves. It wasn't that serious. Surely this isn't a mortal sin, just thinking it. It's one thing to think it, it's another thing to do it, and so on. And this is, of course, the posture of the Pharisees.

Jesus calls the Pharisees "hypocrites." Hypocrite is a Greek word meaning "actor." The Pharisees were actors. Who they were on the surface was not who they were underneath. How did he know? How can you tell? By their actions. How could there be all these good church people around and all this oppression and hatred and injustice in which they were passive or even active participants?

Many faithful people work very hard to bring the inner self into relationship with the outward profession, but it was and is very difficult. Many people don't even understand that this is the issue. For many, evil and guilt and defensiveness and even oppression of others fester in the wound of the division. We cannot face the division we feel, and so we are driven mad by it.

The roots of sin and evil go deep.
We are divided in our souls

2. Radical action is necessary. [You'd be willing to cut off your hand to avoid hell]

“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.”

This is not an instruction. And it is not a metaphor. And it is not an injunction to self-mutilation. It's simply a statement of fact. If you knew you could reverse a sentence condemning you to eternal suffering and, instead, enjoy eternal bliss by cutting off your right hand – and only by doing that – you would almost certainly do it.

The point of Jesus' comment here is the radical nature of the solution necessary. To remove the sources of sin and evil within ourselves would be like a kind of radical surgery – and even that would not remove them. There is no limb we can cut off that will stop the problem. Lust cannot be ended by gouging out the eye that looks lustfully at a woman!

But radical surgery is needed, and every day it is avoided, the denial and the self-justification and the internal paralysis – or alternatively the externalized blaming and anger and aggression – become greater. It is the inner conflict that takes over, a conflict of conscience. The soul refuses to be silenced in its desire for life, but the knowledge of the failure of goodness punctures our heart and rips at our integrity.

If we could solve it by losing a hand, and be God's people forever, would we be willing to do it?

It is for this reason that the poor, or those in tragedy or need, come to Jesus – for there is nothing left, desperation is present, and the need for salvation and healing is so clear. But these teachings are addressed particularly to those whose investment in not facing the radical nature of their need is well-developed. The words are for the middle class. The words are for the almost stable, the almost moral, as well as for those who hide their sadness or despair or rage or vengeance under an actor's mask of gentility.

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3. The beginning is a change of heart – a renewal of mind.

In the context of forgiveness, honesty and prayer.

When the conflict in your inner life becomes unavoidable; when you know that you cannot cut out the source of difficulty and evil within yourself; when you know that you are up against the spiritual forces of the universe in the society, and that they have a local office in your own soul – when you know this, as well as know your own efforts,

and your own good intentions; when you can know this, then you are ripe for the healing power of God.

Which is why it all starts with God's acceptance of us. When we call Jesus the Son of God, we are saying more about God than we are about Jesus. We are saying that we think that God is like Jesus – that Jesus is an accurate representation of God. And therefore we are saying that we believe God feels, behaves, and cares for every person the way Jesus did. The point here is acceptance – whoever you are – priest, prostitute, or Pharisee – Jesus meets you clearly, knowing what is inside, and accepting you as a fellow child of the Father who created and loves us all.

Here is the beginning of health, in his view of you. If he accepts you as you are, then you do not need to deny who you are, whatever your inner conflict and desperation may be. Healing begins with forgiveness and acceptance, and it continues through honesty and prayer. Often, usually, it helps for this work to at least be shared with another accepting, prayerful, human being who also believes in honesty and hope.

Out of this healing comes the strength to live, and the power of vocation. But you have to accept your imperfection by your own lights, and to seek the perfection of God – as God understands it – a connection with your heart and your actions. It could be that you will come to find that true virtue actually has a root in you, not because of your innate goodness, or because of self-approval, but because you find that Christ, that the Holy Spirit, is actually bringing out love and service in you.

Jesus called this process *metanoia* – usually translated repentance. The word actually means a radical change of viewpoint, the kind of thing which means something more than changing your mind. It means finding your heart, being willing to be wrong, being willing to pray without ceasing, and seeing clearly for the first time. *Metanoia* describes an active state, one which continues to grow and learn, to discover and to revise, to live and to love, and to come back time and time again from the sin and despair which cling so closely, which have been rooted in our own souls.

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AMEN.