

Sixth Sunday After Epiphany

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Paul Eldred

February 12th, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

If I asked you to envision God, what would God look like to you? What picture comes into your mind when you think of God?

For some, they may see God as a source of light – maybe the sun peeking through a cloudy day. For others, they may picture Jesus hanging on the cross – God’s love made manifest. But for a great many people, I think they may envision God as a old man with a white beard and long flowing hair sitting in judgment – eternally ready to wag his finger at you to tell you what not to do. We might envision this God as a taskmaster, giving us the rules of how to make ourselves righteous or holy. And unfortunately, for many, this vision of God has been reinforced by a vision of the Church that concerns itself with personal piety and morality instruction. A Church that is focused on giving us lists of dos and don’ts and filled with pastors that condemn sin even as they themselves sin.

It seems no wonder to me why so many people have decided that they are done with church after experiences like these. Who wants to worship a God who cares mostly about legality and self-righteousness? Who wants to deal with hypocritical pastors lecturing on morality and purity? Why would you want to be a part of a religion that seems to be little more than a checklist on how to get into heaven while ignoring the realities of life here and now?

And on days like today when our gospel text seems to be little more than Jesus giving us a pretty strict list of dos and don'ts, it may seem hard to argue with this assertion that Christianity and its teachings are just a listing of morality statements. But if we put this passage in its proper context, we may see things a little bit differently.

This is the third Sunday in a four-week reading of the Sermon on the Mount. As I mentioned before, this is Jesus' first sermon in the Gospel of Matthew and comes right at the beginning of his ministry. This is Jesus telling his followers that he is bringing in a new reign of God's beloved community. He starts by declaring all of the rejected and the outcast of the world to be blessed in God's eyes. He calls his followers the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And now, he is giving his disciples some idea of how they can live together in this new community – because really, that's what this gospel reading is – a guide for living together. Even so, this reading is still a rough one. It's one that makes us put a question mark when we say, "The Gospel of Our Lord" or "Praise to you, O Christ." But really, this is Jesus challenging his disciples to look beyond themselves and to see the people around them.

It's easy to pass off the law and the Ten Commandments as something I have to do to make myself righteous before God as if it's all about my actions. But really, that's only part of it. God's law is about living in community with each other. As one of my seminary professors says, the law is the rules for God's children to play nicely together in God's sandbox. It's about how we relate to each other and have relationship with each other. The law helps us strengthen our relationship with God, yes, but it also reorients us to care for our relationship with our neighbor as well. So when Jesus is talking about the law today, he's not just talking about a God and me relationship, but reminding us about a relationship between us and all of God's children living in this new community Christ is creating. Jesus is saying

that the law is not simply a moral and self-justifying checklist – it’s about how we can live better in community.

Jesus is telling us that to live together in good relationships, it’s not enough to treat the law like a to-do list – to just say, “Well I haven’t killed anyone today, check!” We have to think about what it means to live together. We have to think, if I am not reconciled to my sibling in Christ, are we really living in community?

It’s not enough to not actually commit an act of adultery – Jesus challenges us to see each other as more than objects made for our own pleasure, but as people who are made in the image of God and worthy of respect and value.

It’s not enough to follow the correct procedures for divorce – we are called to love each other and to care for those who are most vulnerable in society and not treat anyone as disposable.

And if we are people who are trustworthy and truthful, we will have no need of swearing by anything to prove we tell the truth because everyone will know our words are always true.

These visions Jesus gives to this new Christ-following community are radical in that they reorient his followers from caring about themselves to instead care about each other. It was radical then and it’s radical now – in a society that values the individual and personal accomplishments. Where self-worth is everything we do everything we can to better ourselves. But that is not community as Christ sees it. Then and now, God gives us the law to remind us to care for each other.

This is God’s vision for the Kingdom of God. These are ways we can live together in peace and love. As Deuteronomy reminds us today, God gives the law for the *life* of God’s beloved community.

But make no mistake this is not easy. Now more than ever it's hard to imagine how we as Christians in this country alone can come together and live in the community of God that Jesus envisions for us – to move past the divisions and sparing on both sides. To value each other as beloved and worthy of love and respect. It's not easy to enact this vision – to see each other as part of this beloved community. To see a community that spans partisan divides or personal divisions. A community that goes beyond racial or ethnic distinctions with no regard for nationality or immigration status. To make it so when we picture God in our minds, we see the face of our neighbor. To remind us that when we come to this table of blessing, we reunite ourselves not only with our God, but also with every sibling in Christ who shares in this holy and life-giving meal. We experience this enacted love of God as a community trying to live into the vision Christ has for us.

Our God is a God of relationship and calls us to live together in community. And it's more than a community that gathers here once a week, it's a radical vision for human relationships throughout our lives – in our homes and workplaces and schools, in our civic spaces and political arenas, across borders and nationalities and religions. We have a God who comes to us through other people, who created each person in God's own image and wants us to live with each other in love and peace.

But even with some texts that are difficult, with instructions for communal living that challenge us, remember that this is only one part of Jesus' great sermon to us.

Remember that you are blessed.

Remember that you are salt and light.

Remember that our God has created you – all of us – to live into the love in which we are created. That God came to earth to live with us, to teach us, and show us the vastness of love God has for us. That God came to earth, and continues to come to us, to

live with us, to teach us, and to show the vastness of love that God has for us. And we get to be beacons of that love for a world that is so fractured, so divided, so in need of love.

And now we can live into that love.

Amen.