

Epiphany 6 (A) February 12, 2017
St. Timothy's Episcopal Church / Creve Coeur, Missouri
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Matthew 5:21-37

Most of you are seated next to someone – perhaps a friend, spouse or other family member. Or if you are seated by yourself, someone is nearby so that you can glance his or her way.

That's what I want you to do – to take a good look at the person next to you. If you are shy and want to do just a quick, sneaky type glance, then okay, do that. But I want you to have a visual image, a mental awareness of someone seated next to you or near you.

Why? Because your faith and life as a disciple is not just personal, but is for the sake of all. Your life as a disciple is as much for that person you are looking at as it is for yourself. Your manifestation of Jesus in the world – we are all little epiphanies (for better or for worse) – is not for private purposes, but for the sake of the community.

And that community starts with the person next to or near to you.

During this season of Epiphany, we are not focused on the historic Jesus but on how our life, attitude, and behavior continue the ministry of Jesus into the world. Being a follower of Jesus, being a member of St. Timothy's isn't a private deal, a little two-party arrangement between you and Jesus.

That's an essential base, of course, but being a faithful follower of Jesus has to do with that person next to you, and next to her or him, and on and on out into the world. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself, Jesus taught.

The Sermon on the Mount which we began reading two Sundays ago turns our perspective outside of ourselves. It is the single longest piece of teaching from Jesus in the New Testament. This sermon has been studied by scholars ever since because in it we find what it means to be a bearer of God's kingdom beyond myself.

It starts gently enough with the blessedness of the Beatitudes; then Jesus extends the call to be salt and light in the world. Heidi reminded us last week that being salt means many things, but for sure that we are “to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth.” Left to our own devices, she pointed out, we might keep our salt and personal tables restricted, but in God's good grace the table of the Lord includes and extends love to all.

The section I read today challenges us with what scripture scholars call the “antitheses,” a formula in which Jesus again and again says: “You have heard it said...but I say to you.”

When he says “**You have heard it said**” he quotes Jewish Law and then extends it into new understanding and expectations when he says, “**But I say to you.**” His sermon on the mountain-side does not abolish the law and the prophets but seeks to fulfill them more fully, more deeply and more genuinely.

It is easy, I think, to feel withered by the intensity of these teachings. There are 6 of these “thesis – antithesis” sayings; today’s section includes four of the six: one on anger, adultery, divorce and taking oaths.

In these antitheses Jesus teaches, as I noted earlier, that our discipleship is not a private morality or a surface compliance with rules. Rather the Kingdom of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, demands a radical discipleship such that even a person’s inner thoughts and relationships are transformed.

- Thus, the prohibition against murder goes deeper to caution about harboring insults and resentments or abusive relationships.
- His teachings about adultery and divorce warn against a culture of male dominance and privilege and moves deeply into affirming the dignity of women.
- He expects disciples to be people of integrity, faithful to their promises. Empty oath-swearing that “I am telling the truth” is unneeded if in our life in Christ we are truth-tellers all of the time.

One thing scholars of the Sermon on the Mount agree upon is that Jesus’ teachings point to the primacy of personal relationships. We are called in our own time to discover how “respect for the life of another, regard for the right of another to be, reverence for another as the creation of God” (Westminster Bible Companion) is being played out in our day and time. Respect, regard and reverence for each other and for the world are Christ-like, Sermon-the-Mount-like attitudes.

I know of a vestry retreat in another parish that asked “if our church was on fire but you could save one thing, what would it be?” Someone said the altar cross; another the Register Book of baptisms, marriages & services; another said she’d grab the financial and computer records. All good impulses, but the best answer was, “I’d be sure everyone was out because our church is the people, reaching out to each other and the world. The building is not us, we are the church.”

And that’s why I started and now ending my sermon by asking you to look next to you, near to you, and even far from you because your discipleship is for them as much as for you. We can’t be a private citizen in the Kingdom of God!

Out-Take:

Matthew’s gospel gives us a great introduction of Jesus: he is by genealogy, the son of David (1:1-17), he is God with us (1:23), the king of the Jews (2:2), he is a threat to Herod’s throne because he announced a new reign: the kingdom of heaven. He became a refugee, protected by Joseph and Mary’s escape to Egypt and when he returned he grew into adulthood in Nazareth in Galilee. Baptized by John the Baptist, he successfully resists the temptations in the wilderness, calls disciples and then...