

February 12, 2017
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Matthew 5:21-37

Baptized for Heaven

In these weeks of January and February, on the church calendar and in church lingo in these weeks after Epiphany, in the gospel reading for each Sunday we're working our way through the Sermon on the Mount, that foundational discourse on discipleship that Jesus preaches in the gospel of Matthew. Last week's excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount had an emphasis on light: "You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others..." We'll hear that verse again today, just after this sermon, at the very end of the sacrament of baptism, when a lighted candle, a baptismal candle, lit from the Christ candle, will be given to little Jordan Mitchell, it is given with these words "Let your light so shine..." Those words, that verse, was in the first part of last week's excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, but last week's reading last week didn't exactly end on a light note.

Last week's gospel reading ended with Jesus saying this: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." That sounds dark. That sounds ominous. That sounds like heaven is a place reserved for a very few, and that getting there is dependent upon what you do. It almost sounds as if Jesus is saying, "Unless you do good, unless you do better than the goodiest goody two shoes, you won't get into heaven."

And then this week's gospel reading picks up right after that bit about heaven with words about hell. There's hell to pay in Matthew today: hell is described as a place of fire, and a place that you're liable to go if you say someone is a fool. Well who hasn't said that? Who hasn't said that already this morning? If not out loud, at least in your head. That counts, too, as we also hear in this gospel excerpt today, in this hard, seemingly dark reading.

All of you, and me, are liable to judgement, says Jesus, and Jesus is even more particular in his interpretation than the legal and religious experts of the day, the scribes and Pharisees. They were known for their high standards, but Jesus takes it yet farther, Jesus goes exponential. When Jesus talks about the law and where it leads, Jesus ratchets up the expectations and extends the reach. Jesus says that anger is murder. Jesus says that adultery happens not just in the act, but with looking with lust. Jesus says that it's better to lose an eye than for your whole body to go to hell, and if your hand causes you to sin, then you should cut it off.

What is going on here? Jesus is not literally telling us to cut off a hand, or pluck out an eye, neither as punishment nor as a preventative measure. God does not tell us to do that to ourselves, or to others. The God who in Jesus is revealed as perfect love, and healing wholeness, would never tell us to do such a thing. You would think we would know this, but religious history would suggest otherwise. Terrible things have been done in the name of religion. Terrible things are done in the name of religion, dependent upon terrible interpretations.

That's not Jesus' interpretation, that's not what God's law is about. A finer and more expansive use of language is at work here. What Jesus says, his rhetorical antitheses, his admonishments and instructions include elements of hyperbole and dramatic effect—which is not to soften the intensity, but to effect another kind of meaning. Jesus' intense interpretation gets to the law's intent. Jesus ratchets up expectations to make a yet more demanding claim: Jesus shows that following God is not simply about avoiding punishment, nor merely about

acting within certain parameters, it's about understanding the point. God's law is given, not just that we restrain and refrain, God's law calls to see the other as wholly in need of healing and love as we are. Seeing the other, with both our eyes. Reaching out to them, with both our hands. This means no insults, or objectification; this means working for respect and mutuality, prioritizing reconciliation. That's the point of the law, Jesus says, which is why he also says he's come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it, to complete it, to reveal its ultimate purpose, its ultimate end, which is about so much more than heaven or hell.

The language Jesus uses affirms this, too, in its expansiveness, and its particularity. In this particular Biblical passage, "The hell of fire," literally Gehenna, is an actual place: Gehenna was the name of a valley just south of Jerusalem that was used as the dump, the hell mentioned here was a trash heap, a pile of refuse, often on fire, especially because it was also a place where people practiced child sacrifice. Hell here is very much a recognizable place, literally a place of horror that humans create.

Jesus names that, Jesus knows that about humanity, but has much more to say about heaven. Jesus talks about another way of treating children, and being children, all of us children of the same heavenly father. It is here that Jesus is most expansive, in how he talks about heaven. It's how the Sermon on the Mount begins. The very first beatitude is: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And a little later in that sermon Jesus will teach us to pray, "Our Father in heaven your kingdom come... on earth as in heaven." And even before he preaches that sermon, in Matthew the first thing Jesus says, his first public announcement is a one sentence summary of what he's about and why he's here: Jesus says: "the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Heaven comes near in him, in God come to us, in the kingdom he proclaims, that is not of this world but is among us, and within us, because of him, it's that kind of place, one that exceeds righteousness, not something we get to, but enter, in our baptism and our whole life long, for life now and life to come.