

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Matthew 5:21-37

Have you ever heard the expression “pushing the envelope”?

Well sometimes people like to push the envelope. They try to go faster, or higher, or do more extreme things. They like to say that they are pushing the envelope. They are always claiming to be doing something new that is beyond what anyone else has ever thought of. So their actions, they say, push the envelope of what is traditional or common place. The phrase has been universalized to describe anything that is beyond convention. Religiously speaking, in our Gospel reading today, Jesus is pushing the envelope. In the Gospel reading last week Jesus said “I came not to abolish the law but to complete it”, and in today’s Gospel He explains part of what he meant by that. He begins each subject by saying, “You have heard it said.” He is stating the religion beliefs of his time, the understanding of how God’s people were expected to act.

First he says, “You have heard it said, ‘You shall not murder.’” Murder is the ultimate act of violence and hatred. So we all can agree that God’s people should not commit murder. But Jesus took that convention and pushed its limits. Not only should we not commit that ultimate act of violence toward a person, we should not even hate them. The idea here is that we should not hold a grudge. So, even if we have a legitimate beef with someone, do not hold a grudge against them. Don’t even perform the minor violence of backbiting them, or calling them

a derogatory name.

Jesus pushed the envelope even further. He says, that if we realize that someone else has a beef against us, we should go make peace with them. If we come to the altar without at least trying to reconcile with our sister or brother, then our worship is hypocritical. In fact, God's people should go out of their way to make peace, and not simply avoid violence. That is why we "pass the peace" before we receive the body and blood of Christ in communion, to give people an opportunity to make peace before they come to the altar.

Next Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'" In the Ten Commandments, this commandment is between "you shall not murder" and "You shall not steal." The rabbis said that was because the one who commits adultery, murders the marriage and steals a spouse. So God's people should respect marriage, and not commit this ultimate betrayal of its sanctity. But Jesus pushes the envelope.

Not only should God's people not commit adultery, they should not even lust after someone else. Lusting after another, is a form of betrayal of the sanctity of marriage, too.

Then Jesus pushes the envelope even more. He says if anything causes us to sin, to cut it out of our life. This is a matter of heaven and hell. It is better to live life maimed, than to go to hell a complete person. Of course, I don't think Jesus is talking about literally amputating our limbs. But, he is saying to cut things out of our lives that cause us to sin. Guys, if your so-called fun times with your buddies is getting in the way of spending quality time with your wife, then cut it out. Ladies if your activities are preventing you from having quality time with your husband, it is better to cut it out than to endanger the marriage.

Jesus concludes this section with a teaching about divorce. The laws of Moses said that a man could divorce his wife if he found something “unclean”, or “indecent”, or “objectionable” about her. Some of the Pharisees thought that this could include anything. If a wife burned the dinner, her husband could divorce her. The convention of that time was easy divorce. So Jesus is reacting to people taking marriage lightly and getting divorced to marry someone else. God’s people should not take marriage lightly, and should not use divorce as a means of trading marriage partners.

Finally, Jesus says “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.’” God’s people keep their promises and speak truthfully. If they say they will do this or that, then they do it. If they speak, it should be truth.

Jesus takes this truth telling aspect a step further. Not only should we not swear to the truth, or a lie for that matter, we should not swear at all. Swearing, usually by God, or some holy thing, as a witness, assumes that some other statements may be false. Just eliminate all false statements altogether. The swearing to the truth of something will be meaningless. God’s people should be so radically true, that their honesty is evident.

Just say “yes” or “no.” and let the truth of your statements be enough.

The conventional wisdom says certain things, but Jesus says that we Christians should push the envelope. The world says that certain things are just and right and ethical, however, God’s people should seek to expand that understanding of right and true. We should seek to push the limits of conventional ethics, and find a new depth of righteousness.

Are we ready to push the envelope? Are we ready to be quicker

to love our neighbor than convention says we should be? Are we ready to find new heights of integrity and truthfulness? Are we ready to redefine the upper limits of love and righteousness? The verse right before our Gospel lesson today says, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” You know, a lot of times, people hold religious leaders to a higher standard, and I believe rightly so. The end result is, that if they are less righteous than their leaders, they think that is OK. But Jesus told his disciples to seek to exceed the righteousness of their leaders.

In light of this we should all be asking ourselves if we are seeking to do the minimum in our life, or are we seeking to exceed the best examples of righteousness we know? Are we pushing the envelope?

AMEN.