



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

Radical Reversals

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 19th, 2017

The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

Based on 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

*Come Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us;
Take our lips and speak through them.
Take our hearts and see through them.
Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen.*

A number of you have inquired about how things are going for your new Rector and I've been very touched by your thoughtfulness in asking. I would say everything is just fine, but I'm reminded the word "fine" has two definitions; the first means, "okay" and the second means, "pulverized."

Perhaps I'm a little bit of both!

There's a story about an epitaph on a WASP grave stone that has always made me laugh. Carved on the headstone were the words, "He said he was fine."

But, I AM well... and my first two weeks of living in New York City have been filled with wonderful little serendipitous moments.

For the twelve-year-old boy in me, there is just something about dropping a bag of trash down a rubbish chute and listening to it fall 28 floors to the basement.

(That is just cool.)

I take great delight in seeing all the dogs (great and small) in the city, and I'm amazed to see how well-dressed they all are. (I can tell our beloved Labrador, Kylie, will need an improved wardrobe if she's to hold her head up in her new neighborhood.)

There are the anthropological adventures through the subways... the deep relationship here between drivers and their horns... the speed at which people are able to travel afoot...and the architectural extravaganza which greets New York residents every day. All of this is part of the great adventure for me.

While Ellen does the hard work of preparing a house to be sold in Kansas, I have cousins here from the heartland checking in on me and making sure I'm doing okay and, I must say, New York is feeling more and more like home to me.

Of course, life in the city brings the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor together on the very same sidewalks and, while poverty may be more effectively hidden from view in other parts of the country, the great divide between rich and the poor is found in full relief here.

Maybe I'm too old to be dazzled by it all, but I am too young at heart to be blasé or cynical about any of it.

I know this calling offers an amazing opportunity to do something difficult and important in the life of the Church, and that is precisely why I've come and, I suspect, why so many of you are here. You, too, sense the urgent opportunity here and feel an inexplicable hope rising up within this community of faith.

And so here we all are; here we are together....

Matthew was always my mother's favorite gospel.

"That Matthew's got it all," she would say.

And what she meant by that was that **The Gospel According to Matthew** has a birth narrative, the synoptic parables, a crucifixion narrative, the beatitudes, a Resurrection story, AND a post-Resurrection story.

Matthew is, biblically speaking, "one stop shopping."

So, **what do you want** to know about Jesus?

People always say they want to know about Jesus. Preachers always say they want to tell folks about Jesus. So, here he is: Jesus, the Son of the Living God, at his purest, most unvarnished self.

And what does he have to say to us?

Well first, he tells us that the New Law is different from the Old Law.

The New Law is different from the Old Law.

And second, he explains the New Law is a radical reversal of the Old Law.

How radical a reversal? Well, for example, instead of putting our enemies to death, we must love our enemies. That's big!

Remember the fundamental legal tenet of the Old Testament...the Old Law?

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." (Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20b, and Deuteronomy 19:21)

That always sounded so cruel and so vindictive and so primitive to me but, of course, when it was established, it was intended, "to put (some) limits on penalties to prevent escalating cycles of violence and personal vendettas."ⁱ

So,

- if someone put out **one** of your eyes, you weren't legally entitled to take **both** of theirs.
- If someone **wounded** you, you weren't permitted to go back later and **kill** them.
- If someone killed your eldest son, you weren't allowed to kill **all** of their children in return.

This crude calculus was actually intended to *preserve* life and property and the social order, and to make it a greater possibility that the people of God might be able to dwell together in peace.

The New Law is different from the Old Law.

"(Jesus) goes on to give concrete examples of the New Law.

So what do you do if someone strikes you on the right cheek? The response to a slap on the right cheek is to **"turn the other also."**

Now, here's something you may not know. If we investigate the Gospel of Matthew a little closer we find...

"A blow to the right side of the face would have indicated a backhanded, demeaning slap, probably made by a superior to someone subordinate to them.

Such a shaming act would be more a blow to personal honor and would carry more insult than injury.

Turning "the other," or left cheek, however, would require the aggressor to use the fist of his right hand to strike another blow.

To hit someone with your fist is to acknowledge the other person as an equal rather than an inferior. Thus, turning the other cheek denies the aggressor's power to humiliate and dehumanize another."ⁱⁱ

So, Jesus is not coaching us to be passive victims.

He's actually modeling a firm, active response to aggression and domination by others, particularly by those who are the powerful and privileged.

So here's another example of the New Law: Jesus says, "**If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well...**"

Why? Well, in those days, "Jewish men wore two garments; a tunic of linen wool worn next to the skin, with a heavier cloak over it. The outer garment, often used as a blanket, was specifically protected by the law and could not be required as security for a loan. (As specified in Exodus 22:25-27)

It appears a lawsuit is envisioned here in which a debtor, who is ordered to give up his tunic, should give his cloak as well.

By giving up both of his garments, the defendant would now be naked. And because it was shameful to look upon the nakedness of another, the **creditor** would have brought shame upon **himself**."

The New Law is different from the Old Law. The New Law is paradoxical.... and, it is also empowering!

And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Why? Well, occupying Roman soldiers had the legal right to conscript citizens into service as porters, much as Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry the cross of Jesus.

Roman law stipulated that a soldier could require a civilian to carry his baggage for only one mile or risk disciplinary action. Jesus urges his followers to offer to go an extra mile, as an act of protest so that the aggressor would face reprimand."ⁱⁱⁱ

This is the sort of non-violent resistance modeled by both Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Give to those who beg or borrow, for their needs are more urgent than yours. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you because, as author and Christian social justice advocate Jim Wallis writes,

"As long as we do not pray for our enemies we continue to see only our own point of view.... our own righteousness... and to ignore their perspective. Prayer breaks down the distinctions between us and them. To do violence to others, you must make them enemies. (This may have a particular relevance in the current political climate in which we live.) Prayer, on the other hand, makes enemies into friends. When we have brought our enemies into our hearts in prayer, it becomes difficult to maintain the hostility necessary for violence. In bringing them close to us, prayer even serves to protect our enemies.

Thus, prayer undermines the propaganda and policies designed to make us hate and fear our enemies. By softening our hearts towards our adversaries, prayer can even become treasonous. Fervent prayer for our enemies is a great obstacle to war and the feelings that lead to war."^{iv}

The New Law is different from the Old Law.

The New Law is paradoxical. It's **empowering**. It's **non-retaliatory**. It's based on love and reconciliation, respect and forbearance. The new law finds its foundations in God's amazing and incomprehensible grace.

And, as you might expect, the New Law is actually harder to do than the old law, because our instincts draw us to more binary "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" forms of justice.

But the New Law asks more than that from us.

For the author of Matthew, judgment and grace are not separated as if one is coming from a loving Jesus and the other comes from an angry God. "Jesus claims people for a life of obedience and relentlessly forbids them to presume upon his divine generosity."^v

You see, we seldom believe God does a new thing.

We always assume God is working off the ancient template.

But when Jesus lifted the status of women and included them in his inner circle, God did a new thing in our hearts.

When the early church began to see that the Gentiles might play a crucial role and the Messiah had not come

exclusively for the Jews, God did a new thing in our hearts.

When we began to look at the whole arc of the biblical narrative, and not just a few passages, and we understood slavery was clearly evil and that every human being has the right to be free, **God did a new thing in our hearts.**

It is a radical reversal.

To be rich, you must be poor.

To be safe, you must put yourself at risk.

To be powerful, you must be weak.

To rule, you must be the servant of all and,

To truly live, finally, you must offer yourself up to die.

I hope it doesn't require a spoiler alert for me to refer to that heartbreaking scene in the musical *Hamilton* where the father counsels his son about participation in an ill-advised duel. Every father or mother with a son or daughter feels the intensity of the moment as the father instructs his son to simply point his dueling pistol into the air, believing that no gentleman would shoot someone so obviously defenseless...

The New Law is different from the Old Law, but we live in a broken world, and the New Law can be costly; it can be very costly indeed.

So why pay such a cost?

Because the fruits of the Christian life are revealed only to those who engage in its disciplines.

Because everything of value requires something of sacrifice.

Because Christ asked it of us.

And all of these moral complexities help us appreciate the multiplicities of God's activity; the holy intricacies of the divine which are always hidden... and revealed... in the mystery which is Christ.

ⁱ Year A, Epiphany 7, *Synthesis*, February 19, 2017

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid

^v Unknown

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