

Epiphany 6A (2/12/17)

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

**Matthew 5:21-37**

*Discipleship is not about keeping score. We can't help that biblical law sheds light on our shortcomings. Nevertheless, in our insecurity we are liable to underestimate our value in God's sight, and quick to measure our relative inadequacy against that of others. But we are not in the business of proving our worthiness. God gives us the law to hold us accountable to each other because none of us can make it on our own. We're in this together. And ultimately, God holds us together in grace in spite of ourselves.*

So, what's your score? How are you doing according to Jesus' barrage of moral instructions in our Gospel from Matthew today? Give yourself a point for each of the following pitfalls you've been able to consistently avoid: becoming angry with a brother or sister, insulting someone or judging him a fool, neglecting to repair a fractured relationship, gazing at a beautiful person who is not your partner, getting divorced and remarried, and swearing an oath.

While we're at it, we might as well take stock of our performance with regard to the rest of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Give yourself a point for each of the following commands that you adhere to blamelessly: enduring mistreatment without retaliating, giving to everyone who begs from you, loving your worst enemy and praying for people who hurt you, resisting the urge to save up money for yourself, trusting God entirely with your well-being –

your food and other necessities, reserving judgment, and always treating others the way you hope to be treated.<sup>1</sup>

Oh, and let's not forget the Hebrew law – “the commandments of the LORD your God” to which our first reading refers and which Jesus has promised not to abolish but to fulfill – the Ten Commandments and the directives in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and the other ancient books, too many commands to name in one sitting.

So, what's your score? Mine is... not stellar.

**Faced with such a demanding series of expectations, it's easy to see why many people of faith come to view Holy Scripture as a rulebook authored by a God who is intent on keeping us in line and punishing our failures.** Earnest religious people throughout the centuries have fretted over God's commandments, striving to be righteous according to the law, no matter how impossible the task.<sup>2</sup> Martin Marty summarizes the common approach this way:

Follow these rules and all will be well. Comply with enough of them and a holy God will be satisfied. Learn them and you can judge your neighbor who is not quite up to your standards and can't match your achievements.<sup>3</sup>

But **this kind of faith is a fool's errand, hopelessly devoid of grace either for ourselves or for others.** This can't possibly be the abundant life that

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5-7.

<sup>2</sup> See Romans 3:20, 23.

<sup>3</sup> *Lutheran Questions, Lutheran Answers*, 25.

the incarnate God imagines for us.<sup>4</sup> This can't possibly be the ultimate purpose of the cross and resurrection.

No, **discipleship is not about keeping score.** We can't help that biblical law – inscribed in both testaments – sheds light on our shortcomings, all the ways we repeatedly fail to live up to God's dream for our life together.

Nevertheless, in our insecurity we are liable to underestimate our value in God's sight, and quick to measure our relative inadequacy against that of others. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"<sup>5</sup> *yes, but I'm at least a little better than he is, right?*

Take heart. In the end, **we are not in the business of proving our worthiness – to God or to the rest of the world or even to ourselves.** Grace, by which God welcomes us into the fold in the first place and upholds us through the ups and the downs, is not a prize to be won or lost. **Grace is a mark on our foreheads in the shape of the cross, assuring that nothing – neither our imperfections nor our insecurities – can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**<sup>6</sup>

So what, then, is the purpose of divine law? Is it simply to remind us of how much of a disappointment we are? Even as the law forever remains a stumbling block to us, it's also a gift. The commandments, and especially Jesus'

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<sup>4</sup> John 10:10.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 3:23.

<sup>6</sup> See Romans 8:38-39.

commandments, pull us out of our self-interest and refocus our attention on the interests of our neighbors.<sup>7</sup> Karoline Lewis hits the nail on the head: “Who you are as a disciple is not just about you, but about you as a disciple in community.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, **the law guides our life together as beloved siblings, children of the same loving Parent who wants the best for us all.**<sup>9</sup>

Dear church, God gives us the law to hold us accountable to each other because none of us can make it on our own. We’re in this together. Yet, **even as God expects us to hold ourselves together according to the law, God nevertheless holds us together by grace:** “...first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift,” Jesus commands, yet he offers himself – his very life given and poured out – as a gift that we might be reconciled to God.

So, what’s your score? We arrive today from different hurts and disappointments, but we come together around the same word and meal of grace. **This gathering is “the ultimate leveler,”<sup>10</sup> unifying us not by our individual virtues but by our common need – the need for guidance and encouragement, the need for acceptance and love.** So, forget your score and the scores of your neighbors, and hold fast to the Lord your God, for that means life to you and to me and to all of us.

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<sup>7</sup> See Philippians 2:4-5.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3157](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3157).

<sup>9</sup> See Matthew 22:37-40.

<sup>10</sup> Charles James Cook, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, 360.