

Epiphany 6, February 10-11, 2017  
Grace Lutheran, Lancaster, Pa.  
Deut. 30:15-20, Matt. 5:21-37

On we go, following our assigned reading of Matthew's gospel  
deep into dangerous territory. (spiritual milk? Solid food!)  
Do you want to follow Jesus? Do you want to do the right thing?  
It is a hard road of righteousness that Jesus describes,  
following not only the letter of the law of the Jews  
but the deep spiritual meaning of it: holiness and righteousness.

Most of us are, I'm pretty sure, are humble enough to admit that we're not perfect.  
But we are not so rude and antisocial as to dwell on our imperfections.  
In general we get along much better with ourselves and with each other  
by pretending we're ok.

Certainly at work, and in our more casual relationships, the daily struggle  
with sin is not the ordinary conversation starter...maybe somebody else's sins,  
preferably kept at a safe distance, not usually our own.  
(tabloids or People mag, not person ahead of us) Often we use humor

For instance, Jakey and Amos were talking together out in the country the other day.  
Amos said, "Jakey, how is that new bull doin for ya, now?"  
Jakey said, "Well Amos, to be honest I'm very disappointed, yes I am. That bull,  
he don't do a thing but browse around and eat grass. He's not the least  
innerested in any of my cows at all.  
Amos said, "Well, now Jakey, maybe you should call that new Veterenarian,  
maybe she'll have some advice.  
Jakey said, "Maybe I will now, Amos, maybe I will."  
A week later, Amos dropped by Jakey's farm to see how he was getting on with his bull.  
Jakey told him, "You wouldn't believe it Amos! That new veterinarian, she gave  
me some new medication for that bull, and what a change! He did the business  
with all my cows within two days, and not only that, but he broke down  
my fence and did the business with all of Stoltzfus's cows over there.  
Well, the Lord has blessed you, said Amos. If you don't mind me askin'  
what was that medicine called that she gave your bull?  
Oh, well now Amos, I don't remember. It was a big fancy word, now...  
All I can tell ya is...the pill tastes like peppermint.

So we laugh at Jakey for trying that magical bovine Viagra  
and its funny because it points to that desire in most male hearts and apparently  
in a good many female hearts as well, to treat our sexual appetites as an opportunity  
to frolic rather than to be faithful.

Much more comfortable to confess that hidden and destructive desire with a laugh than to...  
I must mention Jimmy Carter in my pulpit two weeks in a row –  
to make a confession in a national magazine  
that he had lusted after many women and committed adultery in his heart.

Nobody liked that – we all remember it, but in those days it was shockingly beneath the dignity of a sitting President to mention anything about the power that sexual desire has over us. How far we fallen...or maybe, others would say, how far we have come, how the kind of crude honesty of public life now is somehow good for us, less hypocritical.

Usually, we address our sins with a sense of humor, if we address them at all. We circle around them in the formal language of our liturgical, very general confession. But even in our closest relationships, think of the difficulty we have admitting to the struggle, the difficulty, we have with letting anyone else, even a spouse or a best friend, share our struggle and our shame.

So we go it, most of us, most of the time, alone, alone with our God and with our conscience -- our sense deep down, of right and wrong, and how we're doing, or not doing.

Today, Jesus interjects this disturbing call into our lonely sinfulness. He reminds us of what we know: the commandments: do not kill, commit adultery, do not take the Lord's name in vain.

Then he gets personal. He wants to talk about the sins behind the commandments: Not just murder, but anger and judgment, and mean-ness. Not just adultery, but divorce; not just divorce, but lust. Not just waste, or pollution, or greed, but idolatry: the desires we encourage that lie behind these effects the hands that grasp for more and more. "Cut it off!" he says, showing how deep he sees our problems are.

If we get an encouraging word from the Lord today, it doesn't come as a suggestion to do the best we can under the circumstances, he doesn't offer lots of forgiveness to make it easier to live with ourselves when we fail.

Coming into focus instead is Jesus' call to perfection. That's where this first part of his sermon on the mount is leading: to Matthew 5:48 - "So, be ye perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect."

As Jesus calls us into a reckoning with all the perennial sore subjects we humans have struggled with, he encourages us to aim high. And I can't tell you, as I sometimes might, that if you look at this in the original Greek, it really means something else. The word "telios" means complete, fulfilled, having done everything it was supposed to do.

I have no right to say that Jesus doesn't mean it, or that we have to take it with a grain of salt for some scholarly reason.

Jesus shares with us a vision of utter and profound beauty,  
a world in which we are able to laugh and share  
and live without fear of each other; at peace with one another.

It is a world where human dignity is assured, where trust is possible,  
and where the truth is always spoken.

We must presume that Jesus means what he said: that we have been created for such a world,  
that we are made to share with one another his gifts of joy and justice.

And no doubt it is our hope that at some time to come,  
or when all time is brought to its fulfillment in God,  
God will bring all things to perfection.

But Jesus is not talking about heaven here;  
he is using the words, you and your, you shall, and you shall not...  
And so here we are, sitting here in God's house with our sins and burdens.

We must presume that God knows how our bounty is divided increasingly between rich and poor,  
he knows we are unfaithful in our marriages in our hearts, if not also in practice,  
God knows how we avoid the hungry most of the time,  
how we have been building more prisons and avoiding the prisoners,  
overheating the world with various fumes and gases,  
poisoning ourselves and one another,  
and who knows how many generations to come with our wastes...

Here we are in church, committing ourselves to Jesus,  
to his way of life that is totally different from the way we actually live.  
We know there is no honest way to change the teaching of Jesus,  
to make it any easier, or more doable.

Most of us cope by trying not to take Jesus' words all that seriously, most of the time.  
We presumably know that means we're not very good Christians.

Some choose to withdraw from the world to get away from all the spandex  
and advertising and commitments and temptations and idolatries  
that might interfere with a desire to be a serious Christian.  
But that's not where Jesus was, locked up in a monastery.  
He lived in the world, and he invites us to do the same.

He gives us a vision of what is good and worth living for,  
to challenge us and inspire us, even if 99% of the time  
all we hear is its judgment upon our failures.

But no matter how far we are from doing discipleship,  
it seems better to pray for the courage to attempt what is good and true,  
rather than to complain that the goal is beyond our reach.

It seems good that most of us at least should live in the world and bear the burden of failure,  
than try to solve the problem of sin by running away from it.

We Protestants have no culture of religious orders left to run away to!

Is there anything more we need to know?

I have asked myself that, through years of ministry  
among people, like you and me struggling, in their sins, to be good and faithful.

For now, I can only tell you this much: for us to know what perfection is,  
means to know who it is, and to know also that we are not it,  
until love of God and neighbor is all that we have left.

Such knowledge can only bring us all, eventually, to mercy.

So may our Lord and God give us the courage to face perfection,  
May God give us the honesty to acknowledge our sins and failures,  
and the strength to turn from them to new life each day.

When the turning gets tiring, and faith melts before temptation,  
May we remember his mercy once more, and from the very gift of it,  
receive the faith we need to continue.

Amen.