

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen+

A few years ago, late on Sunday afternoon, I struck out on a 650 mile trip to Orlando for a diocesan meeting. One of things about driving for such a long and extended period is it gives a person the opportunity to find multiple activities to fill time. You can reflect back on all the events and conversations of the day or anticipate upcoming actions that will require your attention. You can listen to Mozart symphonies, make a phone call or two, and in the case of a clergyman start some reflections about the next homily. It can be profitable if you do not get too distracted. But there is another side to such tedious covering of the roadway; there is an inverse relationship between how far you travel and the quality of food you will settle for. As the distances become longer and body weary, the less concern you have about finding a good place to eat. This particular evening was no exception. I found myself in the middle of nowhere with a McDonalds on the one hand and a small, unkempt Chinese eatery. The later won out.

Entering the dimly lit establishment I was shown to a corner table where there was not enough light to read. Very soon the noise from a neighboring table of 14 people broke the initial silence. There were 6 adults and 8 children, and two of the children had made a racetrack of the place, darting in and out yelling at one another. Over and again the mother told them to stop but was soundly ignored. Suddenly she bounded out of her seat like a tank and grabbed one of the boys by the arm and headed out the door. As she passed by she said, "Sorry for the interruption Father; he has an appointment outside. I think it is time to lay down the law!" I didn't ask what she had in mind, but it became much quieter after that.

"Lay down the Law"... That phrase might well seem an apt description as we stop to hear and consider the Gospel for today. This lesson is part of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, and Jesus is presented as the new Moses, the new lawgiver who speaks for God. However, the key to understanding this whole section is in verses 17-18 where Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill them. Truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass away until the law is accomplished." It would be easy to mishear and misread our text unless we get the clear picture that **Jesus is himself the fulfillment of the intent of God's commands. He is the sign of what keeping the law looks like.** And that fulfillment is not merely about the external actions of keeping the law, but about the quality of our inner life that directs our words and deeds. From this perspective the Law is a gift and not merely a demand. It shows us the heart of God. Jesus' words are about

what life lived under the reign of God is like.

We have before us the beginning of a set of antitheses or opposites. “You have heard it was said to people of old ‘You shall not kill’, but I say to you anyone who is angry, insults, or calls another ‘You Fool’...is liable to judgment”. What is really going on here? We know murder is wrong and I doubt if any of us have done it. So, how are we addressed by these words? What connection do these ‘commands have with us? Perhaps our Lord is opening the door to our hearts and souls so we may see the places where our relationships are ruptured and in need of reconciliation and healing, because that is what life in God’s kingdom will be. The greatest weights we bear and burdens we carry in this life are the estrangements we have with ourselves and with others who really matter to us. (By the Way, the word ‘Fool’ here or Raca means to deem someone worthless; of no value to God—It is an act of condemnation where we place ourselves in God’s role.)

We live in a world that is rampant with words, and many of those are words that hurt, and sometimes when we least want to do so we use them. We have all been told at some point in life the old adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, BUT words will never harm me”. That is a lie!! Our greatest pains are usually inflicted by language. The natural response to hurt is anger, and we are told that we should give voice to our anger; that to hold it in is unhealthy. Yes, we may need to speak of it as a truth, BUT with the hope that reconciliation with those who have hurt us will be the end result. To nurture it and give it more energy, to use it as an arsenal of weaponry is to harm ourselves and elude healing. That is the force behind Jesus’ warnings, words, and his life. This text, which we seek to understand and allow to guide us, is not so much demand as Gospel. It shows us in the end what life can be if we are willing to live beyond the shallow places. They are glimpses of a world without hatred, where people are not judged or used on their utility, and where forgiveness and reconciliation are not overcome by pride. Jesus is inviting us to get out of the spiritual shallowness of simplistic answers, legalistic, black and white attitudes, and guilt inducing pronouncements that lead nowhere. He is inviting us into His World!!!

It is true that we are surrounded by words; some of them deceptive and harmful—witness the conversations among world leaders over the Ukraine. But there are other words which disclose and lead to the possibility of a richer life. The Christian faith reveals that there is sacredness in our speech which is a gift from God. As Alexander Schmemmann says in his book The Great Lent, “our speech is endowed with tremendous power either positive or negative. To control speech is to recover its seriousness and sacredness. It is to realize that words spoken in jest can have devastating impact and push a person to despair”. But it also means that a simple

conversation held over a cup of coffee can sow the seeds of new possibilities and attitudes, unseen hopes, the desire to know and be known more deeply, and even the tonality of our words can bring life rather than darkness.

This is what discipleship is about and all this strange talk about seeking out the person (enemy) who has something against you; this talk of going beyond the normal pious functions is about entering into God's way of life. The world both in us and out there is choking on its own sin and is longing for someone to bring healing; to speak a word of forgiveness rather than vengeance; a word that says "I value you enough to struggle with you".

That neighbor who gets on your nerves, the child with whom you cannot seem to communicate, that spouse who hits all the wrong buttons—all of them are God's children, broken and waiting to see if Christ is incarnate in His Church, His people—alive and still speaking.

He did not come to "lay down the law", but to fulfill it, and to give us the richness that comes from his way of life. Amen+