

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A
Sir 15:15-20
Ps 119, *passim*
1Cor 2:6-10
Mt 5:11-37

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February 12, 2017

The Gospel always challenges. Jesus proclaims the good news of salvation, and that is cause for hope, and it is also a challenge. Today's Gospel is so challenging, it's scary. And scary is not what you usually expect from Jesus.

What could be scarier than the words "If your eye makes you sin, pluck it out. Toss it aside. Better to lose your eye than to spend eternity in hellfire"? Some Christians (not many Catholics, fortunately) say that every word of Holy Scripture is to be read literally. And yet we don't see a lot of Christians walking around with missing body parts. From the very earliest times the Church has always intervened on those rare occasions when people have taken this "command" of Jesus literally; the Church has always taught that these words are examples of hyperbole – overstatement, exaggeration.

The Gospel of Matthew emerged from a community of Jewish Christians. It was written for Jewish Christians from the perspective of Jewish Christians. And for these Jewish Christians it was very important to see Jesus as *fulfilling* the law of God as presented in the Old Testament, and not as superseding or abolishing it. That's what Jesus says at the beginning of this Gospel passage: "I have come not to abolish the law or the prophets," which is a reference to the whole Hebrew Scriptures, "but to fulfill the law and the prophets." And then Jesus gives four examples, each time using the formula, "You have heard it said" and then Jesus recaps a provision of the Jewish law, and immediately follows with "But I say to you. . ." and with this second element Jesus ups the ante, digging deeper into the meaning and purpose of the law.

Eventually, a couple of hundred years after the Resurrection of Jesus, rabbis collected the requirements of the Law into some 613 rules. From then on, a Jewish man or woman knew that if he or she wanted to be a faithful member of the Jewish people and thus get to heaven, these were the 613 things they had to do or avoid doing. Following the rules was not easy or convenient – they required discipline and sacrifice – but they offered a reliable roadmap for doing the will of God.

Jesus took a different, and indeed an opposite approach. Later, much later in the Gospel of Matthew (in chapter 22) Jesus announces that the requirements of the Hebrew Scriptures can be boiled down to two commandments. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and thy whole soul and thy whole mind, and thou shalt love

thy neighbor as thyself.” You shall love God with every fiber of your being, and you shall love the other guy, not as *an other*, but as your other self.

In the 5th century, St. Augustine distilled it down even further. Augustine said, “Love God and do what you want.” Everybody latches onto the “do what you want” part but they tend to forget that Augustine first said “Love God.” In other words, if your life has God at the center, where God deserves to be, then (and only then) will your will be in harmony with your conscience, and your behavior in harmony with God’s will.

It’s actually easier to live by a set of rules. But Jesus says, in effect, “Let the love of God and the love of neighbor take root in yourself, and you will be a responsible adult and you will make choices as a responsible adult.” That’s what God wants, that we grow into the responsible grown-ups God wants us to be.

I’m not saying that the rules are unimportant and that you and I are free to disregard them. That’s not what I’m saying. For many many centuries the Church has been studying what it means to be a true and genuine human being. The Church knows, as St. Irenaeus taught way back in the 2nd century, that the fully alive human being is God’s greatest glory. And the Church has been applying that wisdom to human behavior for almost 2,000 years. We don’t disregard the lessons and the insights of Mother Church. At the same time, we acknowledge that at every moment, in every aspect of our lives, we are called to figure out on our own, with the help of God’s grace, what it means to love God with every fiber of our being and to love our neighbor as ourself.

We are almost halfway through February. In two and a half weeks, the Church will begin the penitential season of Lent. It’s common practice to “give up” something during Lent. I urge all of us, and each of us, during the next 2½ weeks, to reflect on where you are, how far along you are, in putting God at the center of your life and in loving your neighbor – whoever that may be – your parent, your child, your spouse, your boss, your subordinate, the person who lives next door – loving your neighbor as yourself. Having reflected and taken a rough measure, then think about what you might do, over the 40 days of Lent, to form or deepen a habit that will help you grow in your love of God and your love of neighbor. Take your reflections and your thoughts to prayer. Pray over where you are and where you think God wants you to be and what you might do to make progress in your faith journey.

May each of us let the coming Lenten season be a new beginning on our road to Easter joy and Easter glory. “I have come not to abolish,” says the Lord Jesus. “I have come to fulfill.”