

Divergence on the Lectionary - Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A (track one)

First Reading

Deuteronomy 30:15–20

“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.” (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 3:1–9

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 5:21–37

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our passage from Deuteronomy this week comes from the last of three major speeches that Moses gives in that book. And it is a part of the conclusion of that speech. You can feel the way that he’s wrapping things up before leaving. We’re almost at the end of the five “Books of Moses,” the Torah, the Pentateuch, and Moses will soon depart the scene, leaving the people of Israel on the doorstep of the promised land, but not entering in with them. Under Joshua they will cross the Jordan and become a people of a specific

land, not a wandering tribe, and they will begin a new chapter in their relationship with God.

Moses hasn't yet been told that he will not be allowed to enter the land (that comes in chapter 32) but you get the sense from this passage and the words that follow that he knows. "I've told you everything I've been told to tell you, everything you need to do well going forward. Stick to those things and you'll do well. If you forget, well, they just won't." They sound like the words of a loving, concerned parent who knows they won't be back, and wishes they could be with their kids to guide them, even for a bit longer.

I suppose you could envision Moses wagging a finger and saying all of this with a stern face, but it's just not how I see him. It's not how I see God, and this is a man who stood face to face with God over and over again over the course of years, decades.

Depart from God's ways and things don't go well. They just don't. Living in the light of the Cross we see those results differently. What Moses would have understood as condemnation and punishment we see as "consequences." They aren't the result of God's anger, but they are nonetheless the result of our sin. And the worst of it is that the results of our sin so often rebound on someone else, not on us. We poison a stream and the people downstream die of cancer. We hoard our wealth and others starve.

It would be easy to close our eyes to all this. It seems much too big a thing to be "fixable." But Moses, in the verses immediately before our reading this week, held out hope.

"And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. And the LORD your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you. And you shall again obey the voice of the LORD and keep all his commandments that I command you today. The LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your ground. For

the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, when you obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that are written in this Book of the Law, when you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” (Deuteronomy 30:1–10, ESV)

We may choose not to see the calamity that lies before our children and our grandchildren because the problems seem intractable. We may see them and decline to try to do anything because we think we’re too small and the problems too great. But God says that nothing is intractable. Even if His children are scattered to the four winds He will bring them back again. Even if our lands have been salted with brimstone and fire He can and will heal them.

Perhaps that’s why I’m called to healing ministry, to the manifestation of the miraculous in the midst of the mundane. Because even the most jaded of us knows on some level that it will take a miracle to bring peace and justice and well-being to the earth. I believe in miracles. I’ve seen them, too many times to count. And I believe that God’s people, clinging to Him and His mercy, can bring miraculous restoration to a fragmented, broken planet. Healing ministry is like an invitation to hope, to courage. If God can and will override what we think to be the “laws” of nature (at least as we currently understand them) for the sake of His love and mercy, then nothing is beyond hope. I doubt that I’ll live to see the restoration that God has in store for His children on that larger scale, but I want to be one of the ones who plants the seeds of hope that will blossom in that desert.

Wow. I had no idea I was going to go there.

Second Reading

In our passage from 1 Corinthians this week, Paul continues to address the issues of disunity and “wisdom” that plague the Corinthian congregation, but shifts his argument subtly. At first he suggested that the factionalism was in part due to their fascination with human wisdom, fastening themselves to one orator or another, but now he tells them that the wisdom they so crave is actually denied them because they continue to act as infants in their pursuit of “wisdom” and its purveyors. This infancy is exemplified by the way they fasten themselves to one teacher or another.

His tone seems to soften in the latter verses of our reading this week. He’ll shift his tone as he sees the need, but in this moment he seems to want to take on a tone like Moses had in our first reading, that of the loving, concerned parent. “I couldn’t tell you more then because you’re still not ready. I can see that in the way you cling to me, or to

Apollos, or some other teacher. We're not important, any of us. It's Jesus who's the real teacher, we're just His servants, planting His seeds."

I forget that sometimes. I may be watering seeds others have planted, or planting new ones in places where I don't see any shoots. But here in the latter years of the span that God has given me it's a little easier to release my expectation that I'll see all the fruit. Oh, I see bits of it here and there, but not what I want when I'm feeling impatient. Of course, I'm also the field, being tended by others whose fruit in me will yield seeds for me to plant. It's not just one or the other, is it?

Reminds me a bit of the story I wrote a long time ago, about a rock who wanted to be good soil. Here's a link to it on this site.

Gospel Text

Last week I wrote about the way that Jesus intended "these" commandments when He said that anyone relaxes them or teaches others to relax them will be called least in the Kingdom. Yeah. These are some of the ones He was talking about. And small wonder. It's hard enough to keep to the commandments in the Books of Moses, but Jesus has just extended them to the point of impossibility, or nearly. "Okay, I can manage not to kill my neighbors, but if I get angry with them I'm also liable? And worse if I call one of them a fool? I can avoid sleeping with my neighbor's wife, but what's this about feeling lust when I see her? Have you seen her? I should what? Pluck out my eye rather than burn in hell?"

What is Jesus doing here? I think He's making it clear that keeping to the commandments in the realm of the physical isn't the point. He's hinting at the truth that He speaks clearly in chapter 15, it's not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but what comes out, and that proceeds from the heart. Murder comes from the same poisoned heart that harbors anger. Adultery comes from the same poisoned heart that harbors lust. So, sure, if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. But it doesn't. Your heart does. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off, but it doesn't. Your heart does. So fix your heart. Or, as Moses suggested above, when you realize the mess your heart has gotten you into, turn back and God will "circumcise" your heart. Change it.

This is what Jesus was talking about in last week's reading when He said, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Righteousness doesn't come from fixed behavior. It comes from a fixed heart. And even Moses knew that it was never too late to turn and have your heart repaired.

There's a thing about heart surgery. Nobody's going to undergo it unless their life is in jeopardy. It's just too scary. So when I come up to someone and tell them that's what they need before they think they need it, what are they likely to do? Run, I suspect, as far and as fast as they can. And good on 'em.

So what do I do instead? As I found myself saying in the comments on the first two lessons, I plant seeds. I demonstrate the goodness of God. I don't just talk about it, I demonstrate it in ways that will make it easier for those whose lives I've touched to trust in the Surgeon when the time comes. And maybe some of them will come to me for that referral to the Heart Surgeon, but most of them won't. But when they're convinced they need it, they'll believe that it can be done, and that the Father really wants this new heart for them.