

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/22/2012, Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, Matthew 6:1-8, 16-21
Piety Is No Plaything

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.
(Matthew 6:1, NRSV)

PIETY WITH A PURE HEART

In today's Gospel Reading, Jesus asks us to practice our piety with a pure heart -- not for the sake of appearances, but as true children of our heavenly Father. Seek the good, not for the sake of the praise of others, but simply because it *is* the good, and it is the will of our Maker for us that we should be on the side of the good. After all, the praise of others is a fickle thing. We cannot build our morality upon the applause of the world, because there will be many times when we will face the challenges of life alone. There will be no one there to praise us. Or rather, the One who will be there to praise us is God Most High, and it is for him that we should live. Therefore, practice piety with a kind of innocence. Give to the poor, for example, not to be seen by others, but simply because you judge that this case is desperate and that some money or kindness would help:

³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:3-4, NRSV)

PIETY IS NO PLAYTHING

What Jesus does not say in our text is that piety is no plaything. Perhaps this is an illustration of the innocence of Jesus himself. My idea here is this: If Jesus had been born into a more pious world, he would not have suffered so. If the people of those times had practiced the kinds of virtues Jesus preached, then Jesus would not have died a cruel death on the cross. And so, at this point in his preaching, when Jesus is urging that piety should be pure, he could have cried out, "World, listen to me. If you do not obey my preaching here, I am going to end up dead! Things are going to be more and more grim in this world if we do not all start being better people!"

Consider his teaching just before today's passage. Our reading is from Matthew 6, which is part of our Lord's great Sermon on the Mount. Let me lift up

a few lines from Chapter 5, just before our reading. I am thinking of these three sayings:

³⁸Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: ³⁹But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Matthew 5:38, KJV)

⁴⁴But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; (Matthew 5:44, KJV)

⁴⁸Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:48, KJV)

One way to describe the path of Jesus is that he died because of a dearth of obedience to such preaching. There was a drought in the land of such piety. The heartbreak of the story of Jesus is that people did not really listen to his preaching. At least, they did not listen in the way that led to virtue.

LET THERE BE NO SMITING OF ONE ANOTHER

Consider the first of my three verses -- the one about turning the other cheek:

³⁸Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: ³⁹But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall *smite* thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Matthew 5:38, KJV)

In this world, there is entirely too much smiting going on. Take Peter, for example. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus was about to be arrested, Peter took his sword and smote a poor man named Malchus. Malchus was not an armed soldier. There would have been some true challenge in daring to strike an armed man, but Malchus was not such a one. Peter struck him and cut off his ear:

Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's slave and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. (John 18:10, RSV)

But Jesus had preached against smiting, and true to his preaching, he overturned the harm Peter had done:

But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. (Luke 22:51, RSV)

Soon afterwards, the smiting begins again, when the guards strike Jesus and mock him:

⁶⁷Then did they spit in his face, and buffeted him; and others smote him with the palms of their hands, ⁶⁸Saying, Prophecy unto us, thou Christ, Who is he that smote thee? (Matthew 26:67-68, KJV)

Do you see what I mean? Piety is no plaything. Jesus suffered in this world because of dearth of piety.

Suppose the opponents of Jesus concluded that he was evil. That is quite a devastating thing to say about another human being. It is not clear that they *did* think him evil. The Pharisees, for example, opposed Jesus yet seemed intrigued by him. Indeed, they follow him around and ask him questions. And in the end, the decisive argument against Jesus was not that he was evil, but that he was dangerous:

⁴⁷So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. ⁴⁸If we let him go on thus, every one will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” ⁴⁹But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all; ⁵⁰you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.” (John 11:47-50, RSV)

But suppose they had thought him evil. It did not follow that they should treat him unjustly. And maybe by their own lights, they did not treat Jesus unjustly. Still, there was an alternative. They did not have to oppose Jesus so fiercely that they cried out for his crucifixion. The alternative is shown by the eminent Pharisee Gamaliel, who counseled caution in dealing with the young Christian movement:

³⁴But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, held in honor by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a while. ³⁵And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you do with these men. ³⁶For before these days Theudas arose, giving himself out to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was slain and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷After him Judas the Galilean arose in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. ³⁸So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; ³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to

overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” (Acts 5:34-39, RSV)

In like manner, if someone offends you, try not to nuke him. If he strikes you on the left cheek, offer to him your right as well. If people had done this, then Jesus would have had a chance in this world.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

My second saying concerns the positive treatment of the opponent. In the first saying, Jesus urged that we seek peace with the one who offends us, so that we offer the other cheek to the one who smites us. But, in the second saying, Jesus goes beyond peace to something even more remarkable: we should love our enemies:

⁴⁴But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; (Matthew 5:44, KJV)

Again, our Saviour Jesus Christ suffered in this world because of dearth of loving for the enemy. He had enemies, yes. And you might have enemies too. But Jesus prayed for those who opposed him. Indeed, he wept for Jerusalem, precisely when he acknowledged that Jerusalem killed the prophets and those sent to her:

³⁷“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Matthew 23:37, RSV)

Here, then, is our rule: If you are forced to conclude that someone in your life is your enemy, then your next step is to pray for that one. Bless that one who curses you. Do good to that one who hates you. And if this should seem entirely strange to you, then take comfort in the thought that when you pray for anyone, the heart of your prayer will always be that that one should become more Christlike. And *that* will be to your benefit too, in the long run.

In any case, if the opponents of Jesus had acted according to his rule, then our Lord need not have died on the old rugged cross.

BE YE PERFECT

The last of the three sayings I want to commend is the most general and most inspiring of all:

⁴⁸Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:48, KJV)

It seems to me that this rule means at least this: never give up your striving after holiness of life. Let the saint continue to try to become even more saintlike. Let the sinner repent of sin and start following Christ. And let the backslider not be overly discouraged. Let him or her not think that the story is done and that he has lost his chance, but rather, let the backslider too renew the good walk. Let the backslider too seek to be perfect, even as our heavenly Father is perfect.

Again, if Jesus had been surrounded by people who were striving toward perfection, he would have had an easier time of in this world.

YOUR PEOPLE

So far, I have been preaching my theme - piety is no plaything - and I have been applying it to Jesus. But I end with this thought: it is not just Jesus who is at risk in this world. So are your neighbors, so are your relations, so are you yourself. Every time we depart from the ways of virtue, every time we turn to sin, every time we forsake piety, we put the welfare of people at risk. Sin is not superficial. Piety is no plaything. Virtue is no luxury, but rather necessary for the sake of others, including those others who are close to us and whom God has entrusted to us.

Now we enter up the season of Lent. It is that good season when we follow Jesus on his path toward the Cross. We will see that he practiced what he preached. Oh! If only others had practiced his preaching too! Let us be among those who do that practice, in our generation, to the benefit of our neighbors and to the glory of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.