

"I'LL TELL YOU WHAT... AND WHY"

A Sermon on Matthew 5:38-48 delivered at St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, Virginia

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Dear disciples and welcome guests of St. John's:

Have you ever attended at a party or gathering where someone completely dominates the conversation or the issue with sometimes radical views of their own interpretation of reality? And, in that situation, if you proposed a contrary or more realistic point of view, that person responded by castigating not only your point of view but your lack of intelligence as well? It doesn't warm the cockles of your heart, does it? It makes one wonder where and when the right of free speech has reached its limits.

Today, as we rejoin Jesus on his –and our– mission that we've been following during this Epiphany Season, we find him still up there sermonizing on a mountain, issuing some seemingly radical proposals and a plea for a more precise interpretation of the sacred and sacrosanct law of God. In this similar situation the Gospel writer, Matthew, casts Jesus as someone even greater than the greatest of all prophets, God's servant Moses. In olden times, you recall, Moses went up another mountain called Sinai and there received from God the conditions and standards of behavior he expected of the ones who had received his redemption from slavery and the grace of his loving protection and presence.

However, over the course of time that Guide, that Torah, that Law of God governing the behavior of God's people became corrupted and subjected to variant interpretations. One such corruption was to reduce those laws down to their most literal meaning. But Jesus says, "I'll tell you what." Just because you've never killed anyone, doesn't absolve you when you hate or seek revenge. Jesus says, "I'll tell you what." Just because you've never committed adultery, doesn't mean that you're absolved when you lust and have all kinds of unclean thoughts or treat you wife like a piece of trashy property. That doesn't cut it with God.

Then there were others who went to the opposite extreme of adding extra prescriptions to the law that governed even the slightest minutia of daily life: what activity constituted work on the Sabbath, specifically whom I can and cannot associate with, prescriptions for ostentatious acts of piety – 613 plus rules in all. But Jesus says, "I'll tell you what. I can reduce those 613 plus down to just 2: love God totally and love your neighbor as yourself."

Well, Jesus is very good at telling us the "what." But now comes the typical four-year-olds question but is our question as well: "Why?" Why shouldn't I seek revenge when people do terrible things to me or my family? Why shouldn't I kick the stuffing's out of someone who just slapped me in the face? Oh, tell me why I should give the clothes I'm wearing to the guy who just sued me for everything I own? Make some sense out that for me will you, Jesus?

To be sure, he does, or better, he did. He did so already in the introduction to this section which we heard a couple of weeks ago. Remember? It goes like this: "*You are the salt of the earth. You are a city on a hill. You are the light of the world. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*"

As recipients of God's forgiving grace and being accepted into his loving relationship, each of us assumes the mantle and the mission of accurately portraying like a neon billboard the loving character of God and his concern and desire to reclaim all of his fallen and rebellious

creation. So, like Goldilocks' porridge, you can't be too cold with empty platitudes and you can't be too hot with extraneous restrictions. You've got to be "just right." You've got to be perfect!

That's a tall order, I know. So often we fail in our mission, don't we? In so doing, we commit the serious sin of not representing or misrepresenting God to others. That's serious because we lose our credibility for future witness as well as our identity as a child of God.

And it is here that God places a big asterisk on our rebirth certificate. It refers us to the "Christ Clause." In case of emergency the 911 call goes straight to our reliable Substitute. He is the one who literally lived to perfection his own "I'll tell you what." He purposefully associated with tax collectors and sinners. When he was slapped, he turned the other cheek. He went the extra miles we were too weak to walk. When he was stripped of his clothes and nailed to a cruel cross he begged, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." His get up and go from the grave now provides each of us with the incentive to get up and go make disciples of all nations, confident that we have been restored in his image and can again be his faithful representative.

And speaking of his faithful representative, today we honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther on this the anniversary of his death on February 18, 1546, four months after his 62nd birthday. Unworthy though he felt he was, Luther's life purpose became one of restoring the false image of God the church of his day was portraying to itself and the world. Dealing with issues not dissimilar to those Jesus described in today's text, Luther led the 16th century effort to restore the "what" of the church's message and the "Why" of the church's mission. We praise God for his abundant life, his ardent faith, and his restored message.

But the rigors of his early monastic life of fasting, sleep deprivation, prayers, and penances took their toll. Until his forty-second year he was thin and undernourished, owing to his utter disregard of his bodily needs. Then, at forty-two he got married and probably Katie's good cooking and perhaps some good German beer added to his girth so much so that he once quipped: "I intend to give the worms a good meal after I'm dead." Luther suffered many illnesses throughout his lifetime including kidney stones, gout, and heart problems, and friends noted that death frequently crept into his conversations.

After traveling 83 miles in the cold of winter to his birth-town of Eisleben to settle a dispute among the princes, it was finally resolved on February 17th. He suffered a series of heart attacks in the course of the early morning. Realizing that the end was near, his colleague Dr. Jonas asked in a penetrating voice: "Reverend Father, are you willing to die in the name of the Christ and the doctrine which you have preached?" Luther rallied his last strength and replied, "Yes." That was his last word. A funeral procession lasting several days brought his body back and he was buried in front of the pulpit where he preached so many sermons in the Castle Church in Wittenberg. May he rest in eternal peace and may we who are called by his name continue in the venue Christ described and proscribed, and Luther emulated.

With that it's time to come down from the sermon mountain that has nourished our worship and deepened our faith during this Epiphany season and prepare to climb the other mountain of Transfiguration next weekend which is the p Luther prelude to Lent. You'll want to be here for that. Amen