

The Sixth Week in Ordinary Time
February 19, 2017

Today we've heard a pretty long portion of the Sermon on the Mount. From the beginning, Jesus made it clear that he didn't intend to abolish the old law but to perfect it. We see that what he intended is definitely much more difficult than what was expected from the people up to that point.

With each segment of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus went a step further than the requirements of the old law. Take for example the teaching on killing. Obviously, this was forbidden by the Law of Moses but now Jesus extended it to include anger. In this context, anger means not so much the expression of the emotion of anger, which Jesus himself experienced, but actively hating another person and showing aggression towards them.

The same goes for adultery that is expanded by Jesus to include looking lustfully at someone. Of course we can see what Jesus intended by this. He wants us to have a pure heart and not be defined by the exact wording of a particular law.

So far so good. But what do we think when it comes to the teaching about tearing out our eyes or cutting off our hands?

What we have is deliberate exaggeration for effect. Jesus used these bizarre images in order to stress the absolute seriousness of his words. If his words about plucking your eye out were taken literally the world would be full of blind people. This is clearly not what Jesus wanted.

It's helpful to understand that Hebrew was a language that was prone to using

figures of speech and exaggerated images. We have this in our own language when we say things like, "it's raining cats and dogs."

Did Jesus really mean "pluck out your eye" or did he mean divert your eyes when you know your gaze is not respectful? Did he really mean, "Cut off your hand" or did he mean for us think about what that hand is capable of?

We should also consider the situation of the people Jesus was talking to and the historical and cultural setting in which they lived. At the time there were the Pharisees and Sadducees who used religion and the law as a way of furthering their own interests and required absolute conformity.

But this conformity was to the letter of the law and not to its spirit. This led to a situation in which a culture was built up whereby all kinds of breakdowns in morality could occur which were not covered by *particular* laws and yet other kinds of trivial things were treated as very serious.

Jesus himself was to struggle with religious authorities on more than one occasion with the regulations on what was permissible or not on the Sabbath Day.

What Jesus is proposing is a completely different way of looking at the law.

What he was doing is bringing individual conscience into play and not depending on a series of external regulations.

Jesus wanted each person to come to a true understanding of what God wants.

That means the work of fulfilling the law is in continuous progression. How different that looks today in a culture that is driven by media and technology.

The job of applying new wisdom gained over time in a culture that is becoming more and more diverse with new temptations, disguised as normal, requires resourcefulness. Nothing is static and must always be open to new interpretation and relevance. Basic morals are tried and true but how we respond evolves and regenerates itself over time and Spirit-infused wisdom.

Jesus asks that we not let the laws become stumbling blocks but instead be a foundation for growth.

That's why we shouldn't approach the altar without first taking responsibility for our actions. To have the courage to take the steps that bring forth wholeness to brokenness.

The struggle with keeping the law should be taken seriously because it is the foundation of right relationships, with God and with others. Using that struggle helps to integrate morality and ethics into our daily lives and to build up the kingdom of God.

Keeping this law of the heart is the work of mercy and love that heals. As the psalmist sang: "Open my eyes, that I may consider the wonders of your law." The law that reveals the basic values in an ever-changing world and invites us to enter deeper into the mystery of authentic discipleship.