

6 Epiphany, Year "A" [RCL]: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119: 1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

Title: Wisdom – Handmaiden of the Heart

If you happened to be here last week, you heard Jesus saying, "I have not come to abolish the law but rather to fulfill the law."

This is Jesus saying unequivocally that nothing he says is ever to be misinterpreted as negating the law – God's law that is – the law that was deeply imbedded in Jewish culture and as we encounter it in what we now call 'the Old Testament.'

But with that said for sure Jesus was sometimes very much misunderstood. By raising the ethical bar, some said that he was lowering the legal bar as found in the Torah. By insisting that the righteous embrace the *spirit of the law*, some interpreted Jesus' words as saying that he was encouraging the breaking of the law in its particulars. Jesus would say, when you break the spirit of the law in order to keep the letter of the law, you have, in fact broken the law.

Let us see how that can be true.

According to the Gospel as given in Matthew, one day a number of disciples who were followers of John the Baptist asked Jesus the following question: Why do we and the Pharisees fast often but your disciples do not fast? Jesus replied: The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them can they? The day will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them – then they will fast.

Here Jesus in no wise is dismissing the spiritual discipline of fasting - nor is he being dismissive of the prescriptions for doing so that are found in the law. Rather, he is essentially saying for everything there is a season. There is a time, a season to fast, and a time not to fast.

In this same Gospel Jesus will again address this issue of being so concerned with the keeping of the letter of the law that one loses sight of the spirit that inspired the law. This occurred when one day, we are told, the Pharisees and the scribes journeyed out from

Jerusalem. Their purpose was to seek Jesus out and to ask him this question. Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For we have noticed that they do not wash their hands before they eat.

Understand what is going on here: These God fearing folk were concerned that Jesus and his followers were not being good Jews. The questioners were implying that Jesus' disciples were not being appropriately attentive to laws and religious customs that would indicate that they took their religion and their religious obligations seriously. Now that might be one thing if Jesus and his disciples were ordinary folk, but Jesus was holding himself out as a Rabbi; a teacher in the community; and a Biblical scholar if you will. And as a teacher, surely and for heaven's sake, he of all people should appreciate how important it was to keep religious law and to attend to and participate in religious rituals, disciplines, and customs.

Now we can understand why the religious leaders of Jesus' day were so concerned. After all, the law had been handed down by God, Gods Self, to Moses at Mt. Sinai and from Moses to the People. And although the custom of hand washing was not mentioned in the Ten Commandments it very much was a part of the law. It was prescribed in Holy Scripture. It has its place among the statutes and ordinances of the Bible. And, therefore, it was very much an important thing for God-fearing people to do.

So, you see the scribes and the Pharisees might be forgiven for being not a little bit concerned about this backwater preacher from Galilee who didn't seem to appreciate the law. Who knew? Maybe Jesus wasn't even familiar with the law and religious traditions of Judaism at all.

And so this is the context in which the religious leaders have come out to ask, maybe even confront Jesus with the question: Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?

Jesus' response: Why do YOU break the commandments of God for the sake of your tradition?

Why do YOU break the commandments of God for the sake of tradition? Pretty harsh response. But Jesus goes on to give an example of how those who are religious can and do just that – that is, break the commandments as an ironic consequence in their zeal for honoring tradition.

Jesus says, for example, you know that the law says that you are to honor your father and your mother. Yet you, on the other hand, teach that it is okay to tell your parents in their old age that whatever support you might have had from me – well, I'm afraid that I've given that to God.

Oops. Well, what do you know? After I've paid for my house, my boat, my vacations, and maybe my country club dues AND my tithes and offerings to the church... well, sorry mom and dad, there just isn't any money left over. By way of my tithes and offerings I have kept my obligation to God. I've obeyed God. So mom and dad I'm sorry – you'll just have to fend for yourselves. It's not my fault; it's God's fault. I mean for heavens' sake, read your Bible. It requires tithes and offering and well, as it turns out there is just nothing left over.

What is not said, of course, but is kind of left hanging in the air is, "Well, how convenient."

And so says Jesus to the religious leaders, 'It is by way of your well-meaning but misguided obedience to the law who, in fact, break the law. It is you who would not only break the law but encourage others to do the same – such as justifying dishonoring your father and mother – and worse, to do so in the name of God and in the name of good religious practice.'

And for this Jesus calls them hypocrites.

Do we think the scribes and Pharisees who came out to confront Jesus that day got the message? And, if so, what exactly was the message? It came directly from the mouth of Jesus as he quoted the prophet Isaiah: The people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Or put another way, if you honor me with your lips and do not honor me with your heart, you have deceived yourselves, and you have dishonored God.

Of course, when we, or the prophet, or Jesus speak of matters of the heart, we are speaking of love.

The Apostle Paul will explicate this theme in his First Letter to the congregation in Corinth. Therein, he will say, If I speak in the tongues of... the angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I understand all the mysteries...and if I have all faith...but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body [to be beaten for Christ's sake] so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. [Chapter 13]

No, Jesus was not dismissive of, our casual about, the law. No one was more zealous for the law than was Jesus. But at the same time, no one was more insistent that the law be understood; be explicated and be practiced through the eyes of and through the heart of God.

And Jesus, the one whom the scribes and Pharisees accused of not being zealous for the law, here goes so far as to say that if one of your members causes you to sin, cut it out and throw it away for it is better to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be separated from God. A hyperbolic illustration – to be sure, but also a jaw-dropping affirmation of the necessity of honoring and keeping the law.

Of course Jesus is not suggesting that we go around cutting off our arms or gouging out our eyes. But what he is saying is that in order to be in relationship with God, not to mention one another, it is necessary that we manage our lives and manage our affairs from the place of a God-inspired heart as well as a God-given brain. The brain is to be married to the heart and the heart to the brain. But if you find your brain telling you that it has no need of the heart... well, the brain probably needs something of a check-up and probably some re-programming.

This is not to say that the brain is inferior to the heart. Nor is it to say that the heart rules the brain. But it is to say that a brain without a heart is not a very good brain. And it is to be reminded that wisdom is the handmaiden of the heart. And it is to say that if there is a struggle between the heart and the brain and a conclusion seems ever so difficult to come to, it might be time to thank the brain for its good service and then turn and give a kind of knowing wink and a smile to the heart.

And then, in confidence and good cheer, continue on your way - going in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Amen.