

**The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd**

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

February 12, 2017

*VI Epiphany, Matthew 5:21-37*

Come Holy Spirit and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Good morning.

Establishing some context for today's Gospel appointment – uplifting as it is – realize that the reading follows the Beatitudes, that familiar catalogue of blessings, which, two weeks ago, we heard open the fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel; "...Blessed are the peacemakers," we heard, "for they will be called children of God..." (Matthew 5:9). Last week's selection, between those Beatitudes and this morning's lesson, continued raising Jesus' faithfulness standard: "'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill. For, truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished'" (Matthew 5:17-18). Building upon the momentum of the expectations that the Beatitudes overturn – this rising drama of Heaven's reordered priorities – Jesus clarifies that fidelity will no longer emerge from cleverness about how the law might be managed (managed, perhaps, even to allow what one would prefer, rather than what God commands). Rather, fidelity will be expressed as loyalty to the spirit of Jesus' witness and the generosity of God, the Father...*fidelity will be expressed as loyalty to the spirit of Jesus' witness and the generosity of God, the Father.*

This new bar finds its most demanding articulation in the section beginning today, in Jesus' amplifying rhythm: "You have heard it said...but *I* say to you..." While lengthy this morning, the sayings actually continue into next week, and conclude with the highest possible bar: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). These commendations stand as a warning against incrementalism...*incrementalism*: that slow, sometimes indiscernible creep toward trouble and sin.

At Youree Drive Junior High in Shreveport, each year's Eighth Grade, GT class took a week-long trip to South Louisiana. After having studied the history of that, the greatest state in the union, when came my year, the sixteen of us boarded a real-deal, yellow school bus with the green vinyl, bench seats, and set sail for the state capital and the flagship university, for plantation homes and coastal fisheries. As a carrot for good behavior, we spent the last days of the adventure in New Orleans.

Staying in the French Quarter, my History Teacher, Ms. Marjorie Davis, and gym coach, Tom Knox, took us for rootbeers in Jean Lafitte's bar, while we listened to a local storyteller regale us with tales of the pirate; Ms. Davis and Coach Knox supervised our ride on the Mississippi Queen, the paddlewheel steamboat, as we witnessed Nineteenth Century industry and technology; and, finally, they marched us down Bourbon Street, where I still remember Ms. Davis fussing at us not to linger in front of Big Daddy's, where the provocatively vested mannequin legs still swing out of their second-story ports, as far as I know.

We earned a measure of freedom for the very last night, and were allowed unchaperoned run of the Jax Brewery, which had recently been converted into a shopping mall. A fudgery centered its top floor, where two guys in white aprons and white hats stirred a giant, bubbling pot of chocolate. Like beer salesman at a baseball game, they would call out to one another at full volume, "Where is the best fudge in New Orleans?" To which the other would reply, "Right here! Right here, I tell you: *this* is the best fudge in *all the South*." Skipping past the souvenir shops and the record stores, we followed their voices and hurriedly processed to the confectionary.

I had a girlfriend at the time, and I carried a sense of obligation that I should buy her something while in the Crescent City. However, between Coca-Colas and trinkets purchased during the course of our trip, my financial resources were modest by this last night, and so standing at the fudgery's perimeter and thinking not of return-journey logistics (nor anyone's preferences but my own), I decided that I would buy her a quarter-pound of the candy these gallants stirred. Handing over the last bit of cash from my Velcro wallet, the chocolatiers cut a neat rectangle of the marbling treat, wrapped it like a gift in parchment paper, and set it, along with a small plastic knife, in a box, sealing the package with a gold sticker.

The next morning we woke early and re-boarded the bus for the long ride home. I took a window seat, and set my backpack next to me, Cassie's fudge inside. Before we made it past the airport in Kenner (where that old police car sits in the median of I-10), I began thinking about that fudge, and the thoughts went something like this: "You know, I could have *just a little*, and she wouldn't notice. I mean, she doesn't even know she's gonna get this!" Truthfully, I didn't require a lot of convincing.

Carefully, I peeled the sticker (lifting only a little of the red, box-top along with its adhesive), and, with all the patience and precision of a fourteen-year-old boy, I unwrapped the small rectangle. Taking the knife, I sliced for myself a triangle of chocolate. It was delicious: slightly hardened on the outside, and perfectly soft on the inside. Not wanting the knife to show any wear, I thoroughly licked it clean, working my tongue to remove any evidence from the recesses of its serrated blade. I wiped the knife dry on my shirt, and returned it to its place. I rewrapped fudge, I resealed the box, and I replaced everything in my backpack...and I suspect you know how the rest of this story goes.

Little-by-little, from the Atchafalaya Basin Bridge, to that long stretch of Highway 1 south of Shreveport, the fudge called to me sweetly, and, my mortal flesh, weak as a kitten, I nibbled, rationalizing that I had to sharpen a corner of the block...I nibbled, not because I wanted chocolate, but because I had to even an edge...I nibbled...and I nibbled. By the time we arrived home and pulled into the school's circle drive, the box was well worn, its red veneer cracking and its sticker no longer sticking; the once crisp and clean parchment paper looked as if I had wadded it into a ball and played nine innings; and the fudge? Well, there was some left – a fingernail or so – that appeared as appetizing as the slobbery knife next to it.

Now, the truth is, it's easier to talk about incrementalism in the teenaged setting of chocolatey temptation, than it is to talk about incrementalism in the setting of the more mature vices Jesus names this morning: anger, lust, lying...easier than those Jesus will announce next week: revenge, prejudice, pride. And, yet, the lesson is the same: **don't take the first bite**...“Come to terms quickly with your accuser”...Do not indulge in a leering eye...Keep your promises... Don't require your word to carry any qualification, but let it be truthful always, indeed “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’;” and let that be enough (5:25, 37).

Jesus' new standard *is* high, challenging us to labor not for rationalization, but for righteousness...*to labor not for rationalization, but for righteousness*. Building his case, Jesus deploys the hyperbole of perfection – commending even the absurdity of cutting off limbs and plucking out eyes – to press his point. Hear me clearly: Jesus does not sanction either impossible striving or self-mutilation. Rather, Jesus seeks to shock the disciples – Jesus seeks to shock us – into recognizing the corrosive power of incrementalism. Jesus flashes brightly the truth that allowing ourselves just a little sin, can blind us to trouble's unrelenting creep.

Now, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not eat your girlfriend's chocolate’;” but I admit to you that I took the pitiful remains of that New Orleans fudge into the boy's bathroom, rinsed off its parchment paper packaging and knife in the sink, and attempted to wipe out the inside of the box. I borrowed from the school office a small pat of Scotch tape that I tucked beneath its gold-sticker seal, and, after leaving the gift in my locker over the weekend, I gave that morsel to Cassie first thing Monday morning.

See, I have this feeling that upon your hearing this story, you may have clarity that my going through with the gift was a bad idea, making worse a series of smaller, poor decisions...I, too, can now see that you are correct. Likewise – and as comically as you and I can recognize from our removed perspective the absurdity of my rationalizations – so are our nibbling sins as clearly corrosive in the sight of our God. Jesus' higher standard and heaven's reordered priorities ask us to nurture the moral maturity necessary for discerning action based not on whether we can effectively avoid being caught, but based on whether it is “meet and right, so to do” (BCP, 333).

And believe the Good News of Jesus' message! With this changed perspective and reordered priorities comes a better life: not magically, but practically, actually! That is, in seeking loyalty to the spirit of Jesus' witness, when seeking loyalty to the generosity of God, these holier pursuits will make a positive difference in our lives, and – in time and in sum – in all the world.

That we would be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect, faithful in all things, big and small, I pray in the name of God. *Amen*.