

Epiphany 6 Year A

It's a common practice among churches that are trying to attract new members to put nice signs out by the road to display snappy sermon titles designed to draw people in.

So what do you think would happen if we put this sermon title out front on a sign: "This Sunday, Fr. Kevin speaks on Sex, Violence, and Divorce."

You think that would get people's attention? Does it get your attention?

So now that you know the title, what do you think this sermon is really going to be about? Do you think I'm going to vent my spleen about the demise of morals in America? I could you know. But all I'm really doing is summarizing what Jesus preached on in today's gospel lesson: violence, sex and divorce.

And if it is a little jarring to you that Jesus took on such juicy topics, then you may have to adjust your image of Jesus a bit. We somehow have developed this sentimentalized, sanitized picture of Jesus in our heads where he was just this lovely guy, sent from God to give us all a big hug. Nonsense.

Jesus was a real savior come to help a world in real trouble, and so we should not be surprised that when he taught he was sure to confront the kind of hard issues which have been with us since the beginning and will be with us to the end, including violence, sex and divorce.

Now let me first tell you a little bit about what Jesus was doing. He began each topic with the phrase "You have heard it said" which actually means "Moses said" and then he quotes part of the Jewish law, in this case the 6th of the 10 commandments "You have heard it said you shall not murder." So Jesus begins each section by invoking the most hallowed name in Judaism: Moses.

Then Jesus transitions by saying "But I say to you," by which he means that what he has to say is more important than what Moses said.

"But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment."

The same pattern applies with the next section: "You have heard it said 'You shall not commit adultery'" which is the 7th commandment.

"But I say to you that anyone who even looks on another lustfully has already committed adultery in their heart."

Now if you listen very carefully you can hear the sound of Jesus tightening the screws on these commandments.

Sure, the actions are bad, but let's look deeper to the root of the problem and see how they begin as thoughts and feelings. Deal with them as thoughts and feelings, Jesus is implying, and you may never get to the actions.

There's an important truth here. Jesus is always more concerned with internals than externals, with what motivates us inside. He said

elsewhere “It is not what goes into a person that corrupts them, but what comes out of them.”

But there is a problem here as well. Jesus has set the bar impossibly high. Let’s face it, if people are judged eternally because at some point they looked at someone and said, “Ooh lah lah” then we’re all in deep dodo.

But that is when you have to pay attention to what Jesus said next: “If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out...If your hand causes you to sin, cup it off.” This is farcical hyperbole. While Jesus is saying that it is important to wrestle with our inner darkness, here Jesus is also saying that if you take a hyper legalistic approach to these things then we’re all going to be limping around blind and one-handed. In other words: wrestling with inner demons is good; being obsessive compulsive in a moralistic way is bad.

There’s an old story about an American who was on vacation in Ireland. He had a rental car and got hopelessly lost, so when he saw a farmer walking down the road he pulled over, rolled down the window, and said “Excuse me, but could you tell me how to get to Killarney?” The old farmer took off his cap, looked in every direction to get his bearings, thought for a minute and said “you can’t get there from here,” and he turned and walked away.

That’s what Jesus is saying here. If you’re trying to get to the Kingdom of heaven and you’re going down the road of moral legalism, then you can’t get there from here. Because if we kept reading the NT we would arrive in places where we encounter Jesus offering the alternative route: Grace and forgiveness.

The legal/moral accounting sheet is never going to balance; we need Grace and forgiveness to guide us to our true destination.

That is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now somebody at the door is going to comment that I never did get to divorce. Well all I can do is ask: How long do you want to be in church today?

So let me close by saying that the same principles apply: reflect on what happens inside of you, but don’t be so moralistic that you become emotionally abusive to yourself or anyone else, and always err towards Grace and forgiveness. Anything else, as Jesus said, comes from the evil one. Amen.