

Epiphany 6 Year A February 12 Matthew 5 21-37 Deuteronomy 30 15-20

This week, our gospel reading kept stirring around in my head. It could never settle down. Something about it sat uneasily in me.

I could not put my finger on it. Could not find the words to describe the uneasiness. Then it came to me. This week's gospel is a real doozy.

I mean, just listen to this list. We have murder. We have anger.

There is adultery. There is lust. Divorce and false witness.

And to top it all off, self-mutilation.

Like I said, this gospel is a doozy of a reading.

Once I was able to put some words to my feelings, I was then able to start asking the question of why. Why does it make me feel this way?

Jesus speaking harshly does not bother me. We hear it in other places.

Jesus speaking in dramatic and gripping terms does not bother me; he has a gift with language.

Jesus speaking about sin does not bother me; if it did, then I am in the wrong profession – because talking about sin is kind of one of the things we do here.

No, it was not the content of this week's gospel – it was not its arresting language. It was something else that put me at uneasy.

Eventually, I came to realize that I was worried about how this reading might be used. Used by people on themselves, and used against others.

I began to see this reading as having the ability to be used as a weapon. A weapon we use against other people, and a weapon we use against ourselves.

Have you ever been angry with someone?

Have you ever caused someone else to think or feel something?

Have you ever said anything you wish you could take back?

Have you ever done anything you wish you could undo?

In short, are you a sinner?

The answer, of course, is yes. Every one of us is a sinner.

We have said things and done things we are not proud of.

We continue to say and do things that we should not.

And God help us, there is a 100% certainty that we will say and do things that are wrong again.

We have sinned.

We will sin.

We are sinners.

The danger of this reading is to take it completely out of the context of the rest of the gospel. That it be taken completely on its own. In a vacuum, untethered from anything else that Jesus said or did.

If that is the case, then this is something we can use to attack other people with. Accusing them of any and all infractions, no matter how big or small.

We can use it against ourselves, bludgeoning ourselves with guilt and shame for every sin we have done.

It is important to remember that Jesus said and did more than this reading alone.

Jesus said in Chapter 9 of Matthew “I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

And what did that calling of sinners look like?

It looked like Jesus angering the upright, the righteous, the good people of his day by being with sinners. By sitting down at table with them. Breaking bread with them.

Now this is a rhetorical question, but what happens when we share a meal together?

We talk, we participate, we open up. We start to learn something about people. What things they have done. What things have been done to them. We learn who they are.

I do not find it hard to imagine at all, that when Jesus sat at table with sinners, they opened up to him, and laid out before him all their sins. Shared the things they regretted, or revealed the things they could not yet see as being wrong. Shared with him the past sins that had been visited upon them, and which left them wounded.

And in turn, I think Jesus revealed himself to them. Showered them who he was.

And what they discovered was mercy, was compassion, was love.

Those meals with sinners would one day become something more. They would become our weekly feast of communion together.

Another meal Jesus is having with sinners.

We know ourselves. We know we are not perfect. We know our neighbors, we know they are not perfect. But yet here we are. Here God is. Week after week, offering himself to us. Week after week, Jesus saying “I know, I know the wrongs, I know the hurt, I know the pain. For a moment, for this moment at least, put down

that sin. Cut it off, pluck it out. And if you can't do that, then hand it over to me. In this moment at least, hand me that sin so that I may carry it for you. And maybe you will grow a little stronger, become a little bit more alive in me."

Our Old Testament reading today said that before each person is life and death – and whichever one we choose will be given. I really believe that. I believe each of us is presented with life and death. The death of sin, which keeps us alienated from God, and in strife with one another. Or the life of Jesus Christ, which reconciles one to another, and restores us to God.

Jesus' words today are arresting and powerful, because our sin is arresting and powerful. They are a matter of life and death. Of being dead in sin, or living in the mercy of God.

If our sin goes un-named, unrecognized, if it goes by without being called what it is, then it really does have its claws deep in us. We really are dead.

If we can hear the gospel reading and say "Yep, that does not apply to me. I am all good; nothing wrong with me. I never say, or do, or think, or feel anything wrong." Then we really are dead in sin.

And worse yet, if we hear this reading and say "Wow, that sounds like my neighbor, like my friend, like my family. That is a perfect description of my

enemy.” Then not only are we dead in sin, but we are actively participating in it without remorse.

Be careful, when you come forward to share this meal with Jesus, you will be seen as what you are, a sinner.

Be careful, when you come forward, you will be sharing this meal with, and surrounded by other sinners.

And really be careful, because if you accept those facts, then you might start to see past that sin to who you really are – beloved, cherished, a treasured procession of God.

Be careful, because you might start to see past the sins of others to who they really are – beloved, cherished, treasured procession of God almighty.

That is why Jesus is so dangerous, and so powerful. He confronts our sin without hesitation or platitudes – and then he offers a way forward.

To those who are dead in sin – that want the division, the fear, and the hate it causes to spread and flourish – Jesus is so dangerous.

To any and all who want something different than this fallen world; who want something better for themselves and for all people, Jesus is so powerful.

Because Jesus says, “All of you, come to table with me, and share this meal of grace. Come, not in spite of your sin, but because of it. Hand it over to me. Let me carry it a little while. Grow into the life God has called you to. Become the creature of love God has created you to be. Share. Share what you have found here with others. Share the grace and mercy that reveals a love so profound nothing can ever separate us from it.” Amen.