



Epiphany 6 (A)

All Sinners

[RCL]: Deuteronomy 30:15-20 or Sirach 15:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

There have been many good and talented comedy troupes throughout the years: Burns and Allen, Martin and Lewis, the original cast of Saturday Night Live, for instance. Of course, there is Monty Python, so good it hurts. But of all the wonderful comedy troupes, from Second City to the Upright Citizen's Brigade, one of the very best has to be the Kids in the Hall.

Active in the 1990s, these comedians are genius, featuring such recurring characters as Chicken Lady, Mr. Heavy Foot, the It's a Fact Girl, and – who could ever forget – Headcrusher? One of the most memorable of their many sketches featured a preacher. It starts with a preacher weighing the Bible and the Hindu holy book, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and marveling that the Bible weighed more. He mentions our need to think about that. Then he noted that preachers must be important because all good comedians have a preacher character. Preacher characters are a solid comedic device. If you have an everyday line like, “Get off the phone,” you’ve got nothing, but if you say, “Get off the phone, sinner!” well then, you’re halfway to a joke. At the end of the comedian’s sermon on the importance of preacher characters, he weighed the Bible in one hand and another book in the other hand, finishing with this thought-provoking question: “What weighs more, the Bible or a collection of Gary Larson’s *Far Side* cartoons? Think about it.”

Well, today it seems that we’ve got our preacher character, but it seems that we have lost – hopefully temporarily – our powerful language of sin.

The question is: what is sin good for? *What is sin good for?* There certainly are some good reasons for being good. Having a decent society is a good reason. If everyone did whatever he or she wanted, things would be chaotic and destructive. On the other hand, for millennia those in power have attempted to use ethics and the notion of sin to control the bodies of the populace. But besides all this good citizenship, what is the *point* of having a concept of sin and not committing sin?

In today’s gospel passage, we get a section of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus expands the Ten Commandments. He expands them to perhaps an extreme and unrealistic level. He equates murder and anger, calling a brother a fool with blasphemy, and lustful thoughts with adultery.

For example, who among us has not been angry? Who among us hasn't called our brothers fools? Certainly, our siblings have called us, if not fools, then the verbal equivalent. Are they bound for hell? Who among us has not had something against someone, or been lustful? Some of us, mostly good people I suppose, are divorced. Most of us have also sworn oaths as well.

How are we to understand this part of Jesus' most famous sermon? It can leave a lot of people feeling hopeless. What exactly does Jesus expect? Perfection?

If we separate Jesus' sermon from Jesus himself, we are indeed in big trouble. You see, these prescriptions for behavior are to be closely tied to our understanding of Jesus as the Son of God. Specifically, Jesus is not merely giving a new way of living that is impossible; rather, he is creating the new community of those who live as if Jesus is Lord. In a word: the Church. So, we begin to see that these ways of living that Jesus describes are more about the community than individual persons. I'd wager that everyone here, upon hearing these laws laid out, felt hopeless, guilty, and perhaps a little resentful, asking, "Who can live that way?" Indeed, no one can live these standards on their own. That's actually the whole point (cf. Stanley Hauerwas' *Matthew*, 2006, p. 61). These prescriptions for living are meant to take away our confidence in our own individual goodness and instead rely on God and each other more and more.

So, we begin to see this part of Jesus' sermon as the constitution of a community, and it's a community that no longer trusts in its own righteousness. This is where the Church and Alcoholics Anonymous share something in common: members of both gather for the expressed purpose of recognizing that they do not have power over their own righteousness. Instead, we need God and we need each other.

Hello, my name is (insert your name) and I am a sinner.

One of the problems with sin is that we have made it rather large and cosmic. But sin is our daily companion, often consisting of the little wanderings from the way of God into our own ways. Yes, sin is cosmic and is a by-product of a created universe that allows for freedom of choice, but mostly sin is daily and, well, domestic.

If we have this community-creating aspect of Jesus' sermon in mind, then we begin to notice a new color entering it. Jesus draws out the communal aspect of sin when he says that if any of them have anything against a brother or sister, they should keep their offering at the temple, leave, become reconciled with that brother or sister, and only then return to the temple. Jesus is trying to get us to know that our relationships with our neighbors – that's everyone – is reflected in our relationship with God. What good is it that you say the prayers and receive your Eucharist if you are hateful to another person? There is a seamless continuity between our relationship with God and all our other relationships.

The divorce statements in this sermon might make some of you squirm; no one is here to make divorce fine and good, though of course, it may be necessary in some cases. But what Jesus is describing is a community that doesn't require the remarriage of women. Remember that these words were spoken at a

time when a woman was economically and socially *required* to be married. If she was not, then great sin must have accompanied her. Here, Jesus is constituting a community whereby, in the words of theologian Stanley Hauerwas: “[If] women who have been abandoned do not have to be remarried, then surely the church must be a community of friendship that is an alternative to the loneliness of the world.” In the first century, the conservative patriarchal Roman family would have looked at the immoral Christian community as a den of iniquity and unusual friendships.

Jesus’ teaching on the taking of oaths is probably the best indicator of his community-creation ethic that is centered on him. Here, he tells us not to swear by anything and instead let our “Yes be yes and our no be no.” Oaths are interesting because, when you think about, they basically say, “We usually lie a little bit – or a lot – but in this case, I really mean it.” Taking an oath means that lying and deception are the usual workings of things, but now, now I’m really telling the truth. Haven’t you been in a situation where someone says something outlandish and you respond, “Really? Swear to it.”

No, Jesus is saying that in the Christian community, what you can expect from Christians is speech that is disciplined to the truth (cf. Hauerwas). Just as Jesus’ teaching about the gift at the altar of God and our relationships with our neighbors are bound together, so too is our speech. We should always be mindful that our speech is ever before God. Taking an oath should not be necessary because everything that we say happens in the presence of God.

What we have then in this sermon is Jesus making an ethical community that needs God and each other, a community that no longer lives by the virtue of its own righteousness and instead knows its sin all too well. Yes, we are sinners. Now what? If we didn’t sin, we wouldn’t need God, and we definitely need God.

My friends, listen to me: there is no harder thing than seeking forgiveness when you are convinced that you are good. What do you have to be forgiven for? Well, look at Jesus’ sermon. How are you doing by that measure? These so-called rules are not here to make you feel bad. They are here to draw you closer to God and to your brothers and sisters here in this congregation. Once you realize that you are not as good as you thought, then you begin to rejoice in the goodness of God.

I’ll note that it is nearly impossible to receive forgiveness from someone who knows that they are good and that you are bad. But if Jesus’ sermon has taught us anything, it’s that all of us, all of us, have fallen short of what God wants and it is our common knowledge of that fact that binds us together. If we say that we are without sin, we deceive ourselves.

So, to *be* a sinner is actually a moral and ethical feat. It is those convinced of their own righteousness who do not feel the need for forgiveness that should scare us. We are all sinners, and that is good. Now that is a final line of a sermon: We are all sinners, and that is good. Amen.

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