

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
February 13, 2010

Someone among you posed this pointed problem to me: "I should like to expand my Catholic existence and deepen my spiritual life. Right now I'm what you'd call a good average Catholic. I rarely miss Mass. I keep all Ten Commandments. I listen respectfully to the pope and archbishop. I'm a reliable family man. I'm honest in my business dealings. I'm generous at collection time. But I'm dissatisfied. There's something missing. How does a busy man or woman begin to be better than he or she is?" I suggest that today's three readings can be helpful if we really want to know Christ *more* clearly, love him *more* dearly, follow him *more* clearly. And so I want to address Sirach, Paul and Jesus.

First, Sirach. Here is a book of Israelite wisdom. The author is a respected teacher who ran an academy for young Jewish men. He tells you that the Lord has shaped you with a fearful power – the power to choose. "If you will, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice." You cannot blame God for the bad choices you make. The critical decision for every human person: "Before you are life and death, and whichever you choose will be given to you." It recalls the Lord's words to Israel in Deuteronomy: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live."

"Choose life." But "life" here does not mean "choose to be 80 or 90 or 100." "Life" here means "loving" God, "obeying" God. This it is to be alive. And "death" here is not terminal cancer or heart arrest. "Death" here is idolatry in its thousand shapes – money in the millions or sex on demand, power over your sisters and brothers or the applause of friends. If life is what you really want, then you have the Lord's promise through Moses: "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." Then God will work in you the change, the conversion. If you really want it, God is already at work in you.

So much for Sirach: Choose life. What the apostle Paul adds is a Christian dimension: The life you choose is life in Christ. It goes back to what Paul calls the "secret and hidden wisdom of God... which none of the rulers of this age

understood.” What is this “hidden wisdom” which Paul declares “God has revealed to us through the Spirit?” Very simply, it is God’s plan of salvation. It is a plan that human reason, however brilliant, could never conceive or believe. In fact, in an outburst of fascinating imagination, Paul declares that if the authorities who crucified Jesus had known that God’s plan would be realized through the humiliating death of Jesus, “they would have tried to frustrate it by letting him live.”

By the death of Jesus you and I are alive. The life I cannot live save through a crucified Christ is a threefold power: the power to believe what the eye cannot see, to hope for what the heart can hardly imagine, to love as Jesus loved. It is Paul’s passionate cry to the Christians of Galatia: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Now all that doesn’t tell me what to *do* if I choose life. What Sirach and Paul propose on the level of principle – choose life, in Christ – Matthew brings down to bone-and-blood reality. Here we have part of the Sermon on the Mount. Today’s extract from the Sermon includes three injunctions in which Jesus takes us a giant step beyond the covenant struck on Sinai: how to fulfill, how to perfect, commandments five, six and eight. On Sinai God proscribed murder, adultery and false witness. On the mountain of the Beatitudes Jesus demands a good deal more: “Unless your uprightness, your holiness, exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The Pharisees were strict. Jesus is stricter still.

Take commandment five: “You have heard that it was said to women and men of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder. Whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their sister or brother shall be liable to judgment...” What is Jesus doing? He shifts the ground from the act of murder to its prelude, to anger. He is trying to get inside us at the emotion that triggers the fatal act. That is why Jesus insists: before worship, friendship. Before litigation, reconciliation. That is why Jesus would agree with St. Paul, “Don’t let the sun set on your anger.”

Take commandment six: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in the heart.” If this doesn’t wake you up, nothing in the Gospels will. And if you are unhappy with the text, you have three alternatives: 1) Jesus never really said it. 2) He said it but didn’t really mean it. 3) He meant it but not for me. Don’t waste energy on any of the three. Jesus said it. Jesus meant it. Jesus meant it for you and me.

What is Jesus trying to do? Once again, he goes from the external act to the internal stimulus. It is not the visible act of forbidden intercourse that is destructive. Just as destructive is the lustful heart. For, as Jesus said on another occasion, “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.” To look at a woman (or man) as an object of lust is to violate the respect due a human person. Once more Jesus is challenging you and me to look within. Find out what drives you, what motivates you, what triggers the deeds you do.

Take commandment eight: “You have heard that it was said to men and women of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all... Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or No.” On Mount Sinai God forbade perjury. On the mountain of the Beatitudes Jesus moves far beyond perjury. In your everyday living, he says to his followers, be straight-out honest. Say yes when you mean yes. Say no when you mean no.

Jesus is saying to his disciples, to you and me: Your sincerity, your honesty, your freedom from hypocrisy, as well as your respect and love for one another, should be a sacred expression of truth. Jesus is not lecturing us on moral theology. He is telling us what it means to follow him, to be his disciple. With God’s grace we can do more than avoid sin. We can struggle to be other Christs, to live the Sermon on the Mount. It may take a lifetime, but isn’t that what the Christian life is all about?

Whew! I have set before you three examples of “choose life,” three facets of Christian living, three ways of living three of the Ten Commandments. The problem is, these three examples are just that – examples. The Sermon on the Mount is chock-full of the paradoxes that make up “life according to Christ.”

When Lent comes all too soon and you're looking for a Lenten practice, you might mull over Matthew 5-7. Discover what it means to be poor in spirit and a peacemaker, meek and merciful. What it means to turn the other cheek and love your enemies. What it means to serve God and not money. Not to be anxious about tomorrow, not to judge another, to enter life by the narrow gate, to build your house not on sand but on rock.

I make no apology for these hard sayings. The spirituality I suggest stems not from me but from Jesus Christ. I set such spirituality before you because you are capable of living it. I set it before you because you are not ordinary men and women. You believe: I mean you affirm that the Word you hear is God's Word, proclaim with your Amen that our Communion is with Christ the Lord. You hope: I mean you confidently expect that the life in and with Christ that is yours now will never end. You love: I mean you try to live not for yourselves but for the God who shaped you to a divine image.

The Sermon on the Mount is our charter for Christian living, for Christian choosing, for choosing life – choosing life to the full!

Paul A. Magnano  
Pastor