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Grace and Holy Trinity
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Epiphany 7 A

Last week we were left with the image of Jesus the preacher. Standing on the hillside surrounded by his disciples preaching things that make us squirm. Shortcomings, imperfections, sinful natures were on display for all to see. It felt a bit like we might be suffering from theological whiplash because in the previous section we were assured of our innate value as light and salt. We were to be valued as we were, not as we wanted to be... but as Jesus continues his preaching the disciples struggle to keep up.

The disciples not just the 12 are trying to figure out what discipleship means when following this new rabbi. Some had been followers of John the Baptist. Some were part of the sect of Judaism Called the Nazarenes the disciples of the prophet Hezekiah. Others were more militant resistance fighters ready to take up a rebellion against Rome. Jesus drew followers across these groups as well as other social, economic and cultural lines. He sought to lead by example, and was a perfect person, perfect like God in heaven, and his disciples are encouraged to strive to be perfect too.

They strove for perfection- but what does perfection look like in this context? Jesus outlines how to perfectly observe the law, by explicating what the law says, the letter of the law, you've heard it said... but he also explores the meaning of the law. This explanation of the motivations behind the law is consistent with the Jewish rabbinical tradition which lead from the establishment of the law in the Torah (the first 5 books of the Bible, the Books of Moses) to the Talmud the interpretation of the Mosaic Law and the Midrash the application of the law to daily life.

All this is meant to remind us that Jesus was not the only interpreter of the law in ancient Palestine, there were many and there are still many interpretations of the law and its meaning and how it applies to daily life. However, in today's Gospel reading we are reminded of the transitory nature of humanity's interpretation of God's Law. Jesus reminds those who follow him of a time (even before Jesus) when justice consisted of mutilation and bodily harm. By the time Jesus was preaching most Jews were not performing amputations as a form of jurisprudence but it was the way that the law was fulfilled in an earlier tribal context and was mostly no longer practiced. Jesus acknowledged this reality and takes the long view continuing the thread which we heard beginning last week with you've heard it said... but what it means is... This is a dangerous formula for us as Christians because we are not very good practitioners of the same kind of interpretation of the law. Unlike our Jewish brothers and sisters at least not in

the 21st century church for many contemporary Christians the question often posed when addressing complicated ethical concerns- think euthanasia or stem cell research is what does the Bible say? For folks with a literalist understanding of scripture the Bible says XYZ and there is little if any room for interpretation. But as The Rev. Dr. Laurence Keene shared in the documentary “For the Bible Tells Me So”, when someone says to him ‘this is what the Bible says,’ (his) response to them is, ‘No, that’s what the Bible reads.’ It is the struggle to understand context and language and culture and customs that helps us to understand the reading, or what it is saying.”

In the Episcopal Church we aren't especially known for our Bible knowledge perhaps you have heard a version of a joke that says concludes “what we know of scripture is that it quotes the prayer book, fairly well” in general Episcopalian aren't particularly known for our Biblical literacy. This leads many to rely on what others say the Bible says rather than having firsthand knowledge of scripture. Now I'm not saying that we all should go home right now and start Bible drills so that we can memorize Genesis to Revelation chapter and verse, although if you'd like to attempt to do some serious Bible reading Lent might be a good time to start. For most of us, what we know of scripture comes through our weekly Sunday worship and the use of the Revised Common Lectionary which constitutes about 13% of scripture, 6% of Hebrew Scripture and 41% of the New Testament¹, read on a three year cycle. This isn't exactly in depth reading, marking, learning and inwardly digesting. It is how most mainline Christians engage scripture is through worship and sermons with this small taste of the divinely inspired word of God. If you are looking for a way to increase your biblical caloric intake I highly recommend reading of the daily office as a prayer practice if you read the morning and evening offices you are exposed to 70% of scripture readings in a two year cycle.

I digress, what Jesus is talking about when striving for perfection is not a complete comprehension and ability to recite scripture (unless this is a burning desire for you, then by all means have at it) rather what Christ is commending to his disciples is the desire to pursue the understanding of the law's intention. Last week in our adult forum Rabbi Friedman spoke of the law as inspiring connections and relationships to God this is precisely what Jesus is preaching. This exploration of the law, delving into judgment and justice leads his followers to the question if they truly want to follow where he leads or if they are just here to check out the newest in a line of prophets, preachers and teachers. Many people exhort the law but not many people can embody it. In fact it might be argued that Jesus alone embodies it that Jesus being the word made flesh not only taught the law but lived as the perfect fulfillment of it.

This segment of the Sermon on the Mount is exploring what it means to be a perfect disciple a student of and steward of the law as Jesus sees the completion of the law. As a recovering perfectionist, it is hard for me to read this passage. It is hard for me not to cast myself as a Christ figure who ought to be perfect in all that I do. I would lose sleep over the slightest perceived

imperfections- my hairstyle not being right, a project not getting a 100% in school, not living up to someone or else's expectations of me was part of my life that I was forced to give up when I had kids. I often felt like an utter failure because I couldn't be Jesus. But through hard spiritual and psychological work I have come to a new understanding of myself. And realized I'm not called to BE Jesus but I am called to be LIKE Jesus. That is the nature of discipleship. Not that I don't occasionally see that perfectionist rear its ugly head, but I no longer live my life with the refrain "I'm only human", as the backdrop of my life. What spiritual exercises- my own discipleship has taught me is that "I am perfectly human" and all that I am, warts and all, allows me to live the perfect life that Jesus presents to us. This not a life riddled with anxiety and doubt it is not about perception and a flawlessness that is unattainable rather it is about reflecting the nature of God in all that we do and all that we are. It is in the learning from Jesus, in the following Jesus and the reflecting of Jesus that disciples are enlightened.

Let us remember where Jesus sermon started with the blessings of what the world perceives as broken, as less than, as worthless. Let us remind ourselves that through no fault or action of our own we are light and salt, let us remember the intention of the law is to reconnect us to our creator. And. Mostly let us remember that we are who god made us to be - divinely perfect in our worldly imperfections and in all that god has called us to follow him, learn from him and reflect his perfect love in this broken and confusing world.

Amen

ⁱ <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/faq2.php> accessed 2/14/17