

***“Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...”  
“You are the salt of the earth”; “You are the light of the world”***

We’ve been hearing these inspiring passages from Matthew’s Gospel during the past few weeks of post-Epiphany ordinary time, echoes of Jesus the preacher extolling the crowds gathered for what we’ve come to call the “Sermon on the Mount.” But no sooner than all of us...the blessed beacons of light on a hill...follow Jesus into the depths of his own sermon over the course of these recent Sundays, we are met with today’s Gospel where we are confronted by a few less comfortable sermon topics: murder, anger, infidelity, divorce.

It must be time for the seminarian to preach!

But, all joking aside, today’s Gospel really can make us feel like squirming in our seats. So, let’s just get that out of the way right up front. Ordinarily, we might be tempted to pat ourselves on the back if we haven’t blatantly violated the “Big 10” of the decalogue: murder, adultery, bearing false witness which are the specific commandments Jesus references here. But, I don’t know one single human being who hasn’t at some point been overcome by anger, dismissed someone as a fool, harbored a grudge longer than we should have, let our minds wander into flights of wild fantasy, said one thing with our lips while intending another thing entirely. Succinctly and perhaps shockingly, Jesus dismantles our tendency to think of “them” and “us” and reminds us that while we love to think of ourselves as the salt and light, blessed by God, we are also vulnerable and complicated human beings who are all too quickly pulled in to the structures of brokenness, deceit, and unfaithfulness which scar this world.

### **Jesus knows his people, and he knows our complexity.**

I grew up in a small, rural town in upstate New York where there was one stop-light, a Mom & Pop grocery store, two Churches flanking Main Street (Catholics to the East, Baptists to the West) and where the biggest harbinger of modernization that I remember while growing up was the opening of a Subway...the sandwich shop, not the rapid transit system! The biggest moral decision discussed over the water fountain at school was whether that mass produced sandwich product was tastier, cheaper and/or “better” than the subs at Ronni’s pizza, the fastest food operation that we currently had in town. On the surface, it seems like a delightfully simple and quaint upbringing. But, of course, there were other moral dilemmas. The town’s one manufacturing company was bought out by a massive overseas corporation, so my friends and their families were rapidly experiencing unemployment and economic uncertainty. There were always various and assorted numbers of love triangles and illicit but ever-so-interesting stories spread via local gossip, hushed whispers in hallways and more blatant name-calling. In this quiet, country town where we knew right from wrong...or at least we thought we did...a friend’s gentle spirited younger brother ended his life after relentless adolescent name calling questioning his sexual orientation. And my neighbors across the street both died as

a result of a murder–suicide that was quickly hushed up and never discussed, nor was the chronic and persistent presence of untreated mental health and substance abuse which were tearing apart lives and families in this rural community. And that is just one community. Each one of us can run parallel stories that cut through our own lives and experiences.

**Our human, communal lives are so much more complicated than we can make them seem on the surface.**

Now, I realize that it can be tempting for us in 2017 to think that has something to do with our modern era. We can be critical and even cynical of the world that we see around us where it is difficult to discern whether and how God is in our midst. Our modern lives are so complicated, that we even coined a relationship status on Facebook to declare it to the world. But, today's lectionary readings call that assumption into question: the holy scriptures keep it real for us. Let's start with Moses, who has to explain with great precision to God's chosen people...who had been led out of slavery in Egypt and who had just been assembled to hear God's faithful covenant renewed...that there are choices to be made about their own faithfulness and keeping their side of the covenant with God, the consequences of which were life and death; blessings and curses.

And then there's the Psalm:

“Oh, that my ways were made so direct that I might keep your statutes!  
Then I should not be put to shame, when I regard all your commandments.”

It seems that even Moses and the Psalmist knew something about complexity, about how the laws that seem so direct and straightforward for others seem so complicated and unwieldy to us. It's easier to judge others, to keep quiet in our own corner and assume that if no one else knows, then no one is affected. Jesus, the preacher, asks us to check the intentions of our own hearts first which opens us up to a deep, common mercy towards those whose lives are as complicated as our own. We begin to realize it isn't THEM. It's US.

**There is Good News, even in all of our complexity: God is still with us.**

No where in the scriptures do we see God abandoning us in our complexity. In fact, the exhortations and stories in today's readings invite us to be vulnerable in acknowledging our faults so that we can welcome the presence of God into the complexity of our lives to help us discern the way forward. Our communal lives of prayer, united as the Church, the Body of Christ, are always moving forward *with God's help*. The situations that Jesus reveals...our anger, our wistfulness, our deceit, our infidelity, our lying, and our covering all of these things up...this is what we do when we cling to the power we think we have and use it to further our desires and fuel our passions. The invitation to choose life is a different path: to invite God into the complexity of our life's journey as it emerges step by step, with God's help.

One of my favorite prayers, from Thomas Merton, captures this deeply human, divinely present yearning:

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.” --Thomas Merton

The image that continues to replay in my mind this week is that of Jesus the preacher. Jesus, who knows our hearts and speaks the words that make us squirm, Jesus who stands on the mount of olives looking out over the crowd, seeing everyone in the midst of their poverty, doubts, bland saltlessness, anger, infidelity and false speech...in short, seeing us exactly as we are. *All that vulnerability and frailty. All that complexity. All that potential. And Jesus is right there...right here...with us.* The Gospels don't come with stage directions, but I imagine that there were times during his sermon when Jesus paused to look at the crowd, to really see his congregation. The sense of uncomfortable awkwardness and conviction was probably palpable to him, too. He may have even seen a few people trying to sneak on the side, unnoticed. In the center of this scene, up there on the mount, I imagine Jesus, the human and divine preacher, still remaining present with this crowd who had gathered to hear the Good News. *I imagine Jesus delivering these words we read today with the murmur of the opening blessing he had offered to them still resonating in the air and in their minds, landing now as a prayer:*

*“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

***You are blessed when you see that I am with you. And I am always with you.***

Jesus was right there with the crowd, exactly as they were. Jesus is, in fact, here with us, in all our vulnerability and squirmy human imperfections, too...exactly as we are. The Good News is that none of our complexity, our indecision, or inability to see where we are going keeps us from the knowledge and love of God. In fact, it draws us nearer to God and to each other, to see Jesus Christ who is with us, who remains with us, and who invites us through the ages and amid all the complexity to say **Yes, Yes** to choosing life together in this God-shaped space, step by step by step.