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Consider

Romans 6:3-11 & St. Matthew 5:20-26

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Our Gospel today is taken from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount which runs from Chapter 5 to Chapter 7 of St. Matthew's Gospel. Luke records a similar sermon preached another time. You could say that this was Jesus' kingdom manifesto and he probably preached this sermon or something very much like it wherever he went. And wherever he preached it people responded just as people today respond to it: Jesus starts out his sermon with what we call the Beatitudes: Blessed are the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Jesus tells them that they've got to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Hearing that we think, "Oh! That's really nice. Wouldn't the world be a better place if we all lived that way." But as Jesus keeps preaching and as what he says sinks in we think, "But Jesus, that's impossible!" In verse 20, as today's Gospel begins, Jesus announces:

Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Pharisees were the most "righteous" people around. They lived their lives, right down to the last detail, as if they were living in the temple itself—the place where earth and heaven intersected. They lived each day as if they were in the presence of God and they encouraged everyone else to repent and do the same. That, they believed, was how the kingdom would come: when Israel stopped compromising the law and living like the Gentiles. The problem was that it was next to impossible for an ordinary person to do. The Pharisees were mostly rich people who didn't have to worry about getting dirty with life. And yet here's Jesus talking to *ordinary* people and telling them: If you want to see the kingdom, you've got to do better than the Pharisees.

Jesus spoke with authority. He did amazing things. People were eager to listen. People had to have been taken aback when he said this, but they were willing to keep listening. Maybe he didn't mean what it sounded like he meant. But then Jesus goes on and it's exactly what he said—the righteousness of the Pharisees doesn't go far enough. Look at verses 21 and 22:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

Sin culminates in violence. That's the lesson we see in Genesis, back at the beginning of the story. Cain resented his brother Abel, he hated him, and eventually his hate boiled over and he killed him. Before long violence broke out everywhere. The first king in Genesis was praised by the people for his violence. On the eve of the great flood Genesis says that the earth was filled with violence. The Lord chose and called Israel to be a light on a hill—to show the nations a better way—and so in the law the Lord told Israel, "Thou shalt not murder." But people were still angry and they still hated. Israel—the people who were supposed to be the light of the world—was boiling over with anger and hatred, the Pharisees against the Sadducees, the Zealots against the Herodians, and everyone against the Romans. We still struggle with anger and hatred. Watch or read the news and your blood boils against this person or that group who aren't doing things right. Your boss is a jerk. Your husband or your wife knows exactly how to push your buttons. Your kids don't do what they're told. Your neighbour is loud and his dogs won't stop barking. The anger smoulders. Granted, most of us probably don't seriously think of murdering anyone, but Jesus says that stopping short of murder isn't enough. It's not the point. Your anger may not go any further than anger and your hate may not go any further than hate, but it's still not pleasing to God and the person who thinks he's righteous because he satisfied his anger or his hate with brooding, bitterness, name-calling, or cursing instead

of pulling a knife or a gun is no more righteous for it.

Instead, Jesus offers an alternative: reconciliation.

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. (Matthew 5:23-26)

No matter how you read it, this is a challenge. But it's more challenging that it might seem at first glance. We tend to read it as if Jesus is talking directly to us. We picture ourselves coming to worship on a Sunday and as we put our offering in the plate or as we come to the Lord's Table we realise that we need to go and reconcile with a brother or sister. But Jesus isn't talking directly to us. He was talking to people who lived in Galilee two thousand years ago. What he's actually describing is one of these people making the three- or four-day trip down to Jerusalem to go to the temple. He describes that person going to the Temple, buying an animal for sacrifice, and then as he leads it to where the priests offer the sacrifices, as he's reminded of God's love and God's holiness, he suddenly remembers his own sin—how because of his own hate or his own anger he's at odds with, separated from some person he should be close to. Back home. In Galilee.

Jesus didn't really expect that this person would run back home to Galilee to make things right and leave the animal there in the temple for a week. But Jesus' point stands. The kingdom way is not patting yourself on the back for hating your neighbour but not actually killing him. The kingdom way is reconciliation. And it contrasts not just with the righteousness of the Pharisees, but the general attitude of Jews and everyone else. The Pharisees tried to live their lives as if they were perpetually, every day and in every thing, in the temple, in the presence of God. And yet it wouldn't have occurred to most of them, even if they were in the actual

temple itself, that to come before the presence of our holy and loving God, to come before his presence seeking reconciliation—that was the point of the sacrifice Jesus describes—while being angry and at odds with a neighbour or a brother or a sister made a mockery out of the whole thing.

Jesus says: Yes, live each day as if you were living in the temple, living in God's presence. But that means understanding and appreciating that God has forgiven you and reconciled you to himself and that you need to make love and reconciliation part of your own life. You can't live deliberately at odds with someone, you can't wilfully hold onto your anger and bitterness towards someone if you're going to live before the holy and loving God who has forgiven you.

This is what it looks like to be God's people. This is what it means to be salt and light. This is what it means to be Israel. But that's not what Israel was doing. Jesus warns the people to reconcile before they wind up in court. Again, to understand what Jesus is saying we have to remember to whom he was speaking. The Jews were waiting eagerly for their day in court. They were going to drag their enemies before the Lord and they prayed that day would come soon so that the Lord could rain down judgement on those enemies. But that's not what it looks like to be the salt of the earth or the light of the world. And so Jesus warns: Your day in court will come, but it may be your enemies who win. Judgement may fall on you instead—because you haven't been salt and light. As Jesus continues preaching this theme gets stronger and stronger. To be light means to seek reconciliation because to be light means shining the reconciling love of God into the anger and hate of the world. And if that sounds hard to us, it sounded even harder to Israel. The Jews had suffered centuries of defeat and exile and oppression and persecution. If any people had a right to be angry, to hate, to lash out with violence, to pray for judgement they did. But Jesus warns: That's not the way. Not the way for Israel and not the way for us. The reconciliation Jesus talks about, this loving your neighbour even though you have every right to hate him, all of this sounds impossible. We all have people in our lives that are impossible to

love. It can't be done. Until we look at Jesus.

Brothers and Sisters, think of Jesus. He was scorned and rejected. He was mocked and beaten. He was killed in the most brutal and humiliating way imaginable. He didn't deserve any of it. He was God himself. In Jesus God humbled himself and took on our flesh. He became one of us. Specifically, he became Israel's representative, he took up the mission God had given her, the mission she had failed at so miserably, he took her punishment on himself, and being lifted on the cross on that hill outside Jerusalem he was lifted up as the true light of the world. He embraced sin and returned love and in that God's light was blindingly beautiful.

And now we need to leave Matthew and turn to Paul and our Epistle from Romans. We're jumping into the middle of Romans, but to this point Paul has been talking about grace and Jesus dying for the sins of his people. It is by grace that sin is forgiven, he says, and wherever sin abounds, grace abounds even more. And so he anticipates someone then saying, "Oh well, then, if grace is so good, we should keep living in sin in order to receive more grace." And Paul writes, "No! Absolutely not. We've died to sin. How can we then live for sin? We can't!" It's not very different from hearing Jesus tell us to do the impossible—to reconcile with and to love our enemies. How can we do that? And Paul reminds us: It *was* impossible, but something's changed. We've died to sin and that changes everything. He goes on in Romans 6:3-4.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Baptism changes everything. Again, just as we need to imagine ourselves as First Century Galileans when we hear Jesus preaching we need to remember that Paul, too, was writing to mostly Jewish Christians only a few decades later. When we do that what we realise is that in

Romans Paul is retelling Israel's story and in Romans 6, as he writes about Baptism and what it means and does, he's simultaneously telling the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt.

Israel cried out to the Lord from the misery of her slavery and oppression. The Lord heard and he sent Moses. Moses led the people out of their bondage and into the Promised Land and that journey began at the Red Sea. They entered the sea as slaves and the came out the other side a free people, their captors crushed and drowned under the waves. And yet they had to pass through the wilderness. It took longer than the people expected. They grumbled a lot and even got angry with the Lord and with Moses and talked about going back to Egypt. But the Lord led his people—a cloud by day and fire by night—and eventually they entered the Promised Land.

Again, the Israelites entered the Sea slaves and they came out the other side a free people. And Paul uses this to illustrate what happens in baptism. We go into the water dead and we come out alive. We go into the water slaves to sin and death and we come out free people. And that's what makes Jesus' impossible calling possible. It's what makes possible a righteousness greater even than the righteousness of the Pharisees. Paul says that in our baptism we are united with Jesus in his death and resurrection. God called Israel to be salt and light. No matter how hard she tried she couldn't do it. But Jesus came as the true Israelite. His life and ministry embodied Israel's calling. He even followed Israel's pattern symbolically in his own baptism and his own forty days in the wilderness. And then he took on himself the crucifixion that Israel deserved. His enemies killed him, but instead of returning judgement and violence on them, instead of cursing them, he responded by praying to his Father: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Sin and death, anger and hate did their worst to Jesus at the cross and Jesus overcame them with love and with sacrifice. Impossible? For human beings who have only their own sinful wills to rely on, yes. But not for Jesus *and* not for those who have been baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are not who we once were. Earlier in Romans Paul describes what we used to be as being "in Adam". By birth we are part of

the old humanity, fallen and enslaved to sin. By virtue of our baptism we are born again. We are now “in Christ”—in Jesus the Messiah.

This is what Paul means when he writes in verses 6 and 7:

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.

Sometimes sin comes knocking at the door and it seems impossible to say no. Sometimes that certain person who irritates us comes around and we know we should forgive and love them but it seems impossible. It feels like we’re still slaves to sin. All sin has to do is show up and we cave in to it. But Paul says, No! That old self is dead. It was crucified with Jesus. We are no longer slaves. We have been set free from bondage to sin. Like Israel wanting to go back to Egypt, it’s easy to be tempted to go back to that bondage. The wilderness isn’t an easy place to be, but the Lord is with us anyway. And Paul stresses that we need to remember that sin no longer has any hold on us. We’re new and free people in Christ.

Paul goes on:

Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:8-11)

Jesus burst alive from the tomb that first Easter. Other people, like Lazarus, had come back from the dead too, but Jesus’ resurrection is different. Lazarus had to die again, but Jesus has gone through death and come out the other side into a kind of life that death can never touch and, Paul says, if we are in Christ then we have a share in this new life.

We’re not there yet. We too still have to face death, but we live in hope knowing that like Jesus we will come out the other side of death alive in a way we never have

been before—alive in the way that God truly intended us to be when he created us. But what about today? Sin and death can’t touch our future, but what about our present? Jesus’ calling still seems impossible so much of the time. And this is why Paul makes this point. *Our baptism pulls our future hope into the present.* It takes the life of Jesus and his victory over sin and death and applies it to us today. There’s a change whether we feel it or not. The Israelites didn’t necessarily feel any different on one side of the Red Sea than they had on the other, but everything was still different for them. They had been slaves; now they were free. And just so for us. We are no longer in Adam; we are in Christ. Jesus has poured the Holy Spirit into us and the Spirit is at work to renew our minds and regenerate our hearts as we live in this in-between time.

In verse 11 Paul says that we must *consider* ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ. That word “consider” is the same one we saw in the Epistle from Romans 8 two weeks ago. It’s an accounting term that Paul uses. And here’s his point. When you send your books to your accountant he adds everything up and gives you the bottom line. His reckoning doesn’t change your financial situation. Nothing about your situation has actually changed by the fact that your accountant has added up your profit and loss columns. But that bottom line he reckons for you shows you *in fact* where you stand. It might mean you’ve got money you need to invest or creditors you need to pay or it might mean you need to economise and tighten your belt. Adding up your profits and losses doesn’t itself have an impact on the health of your business, but it does make you aware of it and it tells you what you need to do.

And so Paul looks at the cross and he looks at the empty tomb and he looks at the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost and everything else and he says: I’ve done the math. You are in Christ. You are dead to sin and alive to God. *Now start living that way!*

Is it a challenge? Of course. Jesus was baptised, the heavens opened up, the Spirit descended on him and the Father spoke, “This is my Son. With him I am pleased”. And then Jesus went straight into the wilderness to battle the devil. The Lord

led Israel out of Egypt through the miraculous parting of the sea, he was present with her, giving the law and leading as cloud and as fire and yet he led her straight into the wilderness. And we too. We’re baptised and the Lord sends us straight from the Font into the world. There’s a reason why, in our baptism, we’re called on to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil. All three will come after us. They’ll tell us that nothing has changed. They’ll tell us that following after Jesus is impossible. They’ll tempt us to give up or at least to compromise. When others sin against us, when they hurt us, when they wrong us the temptation comes saying: “It’s okay, be angry or be bitter. Get that person out of your life—you don’t need them. Hey, look how well you’re doing! You didn’t kill them!” Brothers and Sisters, that’s sin calling. Jesus calls us to seek to reconcile. Jesus calls us to embrace the wrongs that others do to us and to return those wrong with grace. Jesus calls us to break the cycle of anger and hate and violence. And when it seems impossible, remember your baptism, remember that you have died and risen again with Jesus, remember that he has poured his Spirit into you and then in faith live the impossible life that he has made possible. Not only will you and I see the kingdom of God, the people all around us will see it too.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, you have poured your gracious love into us poor sinners by giving your own Son as a sacrifice. Teach us to pour that love back out to the world. When it seems impossible to break the cycle of sin and anger and hate, remind us of our baptism and that we have in faith trusted in your promise of forgiveness and life in Jesus. Remind us that we have died with him and risen with him and that sin and death no longer hold us captive. Teach us to live for righteousness that the world might see Jesus and his kingdom through us. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.