



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Things We Cannot Talk About

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 12, 2023

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Based on Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

“Physicist Niels Bohr was so conscious of the limits of language that he liked to tell the story about the young rabbinical student who went to hear three lectures by a famous rabbi. Afterwards he told his friends, ‘The first talk was brilliant, clear and simple. I understood every word. The second was even better, deep and subtle. I didn’t understand much, but the rabbi understood all of it. The third was by far the finest; a great and unforgettable experience. I understood nothing and the rabbi didn’t understand much of it either.’”ⁱ

Barbara Brown Taylor said, “Since I have studied under Rabbi Jesus, this story makes perfect sense to me. There are things no one can talk about. If we insist on trying, as we are inclined to do, then something unforgettable may happen in the air around our words, but it will not be because we understand them in any rational sort of way. The experience will be one of worship—of awe—which involves a different kind of understanding.”ⁱⁱ

This feels like an appropriate introduction to today’s gospel lesson, which requires a different kind of listening about things, quote, “no one can talk about.” As we continue on our six-Sunday journey through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenges his followers to discover what it means to truly follow God. In today’s gospel, “Jesus,” as we say in the vernacular, “goes there.”

Now, in the face of centuries of Christian antisemitism, we must begin first by saying that Jesus is a devout Jew, a respector and a follower of the law. In fact, in the verses immediately preceding this morning’s gospel lesson, he warns his followers that their righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Jesus isn’t excusing anyone from following the law. What Jesus is telling his followers is that their essential goodness, all their actions rooted in justice and concern for others, can’t fulfill the outward expressions of the law. No, their goodness must become internalized if it’s going to bring about genuine transformation, true righteousness.

So he tells the gathered crowd, “You have heard it was said to those of ancient times, ‘you shall not murder.’” And everyone listening to his sermon then—and all of us sitting here now, along with everyone watching online—knows this. We get it. Murder is a violation of the Ten Commandments. But the point Jesus is trying to make here is that while murder is clearly wrong, you can’t allow yourself to be consumed by any anger or any hatred that might lead to violence or murder.

- You can't insult others or belittle or berate them. Those are simply different forms of violence.
- You can't call them fools, or idiots; nor can you say, with perfected Christian passive-aggression, "bless their little hearts," because the Spirit knows exactly what that means.
- You can't exploit them economically or politically, because that leads those who are the dominated and the occupied to work day and night to overthrow the dominator and the occupier.

Psychological violence leads to physical violence throughout history, from the beginning of time.

Jesus says, "You have heard it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.'" We understand the ancient patriarchy at work here, and so we will need to translate this into more inclusive language that relates to all of us. But here we're moving into primary human relationships and everyone listening to his sermon then—and all of us here now, along with everyone watching online—knows that integrity in primary relationships is vital. We get it. Adultery is a violation of the Ten Commandments.

But the message is the same as the previous one. Jesus tells us that simply won't be enough. Jesus isn't lowering the standards established by the Law. He's embellishing them. He lifts them, he elevates them, to an even higher standard of the Spirit. Therefore, more is expected of one under grace than is expected of one under the law. The law forbids the overt act. Jesus forbids the inner attitude which produces the overt act in the first place. Can you see how everything becomes ever-so-much-more demanding under the Spirit?

So, what can we say about divorce, his next subject? Adultery was seen as a violation of a husband's property rights in ancient Palestine, and yet Jesus makes it so much more by knowing human relationships must be based on mutual respect and not on exploitation. A quick and easy exit for a man leaving a marriage is not the highest and best action.

I might add here that the Episcopal Church may be one of the most accepting churches in Christendom when it comes to divorce. Some say it's in the institutional DNA of Anglicanism, which goes back to King Henry VIII's break with Rome over the issue. But divorce, contrary to popular wisdom, has always been acceptable under certain circumstances. The Torah allowed for it. Early Christian writings allowed for it. Even a number of the early saints were divorced.

Now, the Episcopal Church believes marriage is a sacrament, intended to be a life-long commitment. Marriage is consequential. But the church also recognizes that there are circumstances where divorce may be necessary and even circumstances where it is the healthiest option for couples. Of course, even the Episcopal Church hasn't always been as compassionate as we should have been. When I began attending the Episcopal Church, divorced persons were not allowed into the process for ordination in many dioceses. Back in the day, divorce still left people whispering at coffee hour, speculating about who may have been most at fault.

Much of that attitude has, thankfully, dissipated over the years. Today we try to avoid heaping guilt upon those who are already burdened by the considerable weight of their humanity. I don't think I've ever met anyone who said that they didn't accept some sense of responsibility in their divorce, the burden of things done and left undone.

And we all know people who have discovered profound joy in a new marriage. It's difficult to imagine that God does not want the deepest happiness for his people and the highest joy for his faithful. Jesus is just saying that it should never be too easy.

- The Christian community has a role in helping people find support and good counseling for their marriages.

- The Christian community has a role in helping people work out differences in a marriage where reconciliation is still possible.
- The church has a role in helping people who should be divorced to gently (and with peace and justice) move towards separation with loving encouragement.
- The church has a role in helping to heal the wounds of those who have been hurt by acrimonious divorces.
- The church has a role in being a place where children impacted by their parents' divorce can find encouragement and healing.

We are all being called to a higher way of being. We are all being invited to live our lives like Christ. And we will never, ever, ever achieve it. But our lives continue to be illumined by the holy example of Jesus, and I believe trying and failing to live a Christ-like life is far better than trying and achieving any lesser standard.

But we need to give ourselves a little grace once in a while. After a lifetime in ministry, the biggest theological concept that people don't get remains forgiveness. We don't easily forgive others, and we most certainly do not feel deserving of forgiveness for ourselves. With Valentine's Day fast approaching, what we need most are bigger hearts.

Which reminds me of an old story from the Buddhist tradition. Buddha reached the gates of heaven. And, of course, the people there were waiting. They opened the gate and warmly welcomed him in; but he turned his back to the gate and looked out at the world: millions of souls on the same path, struggling in misery, in deep anguish, all striving to reach this gate of heaven and bliss.

The gatekeeper said, "Come in, please. We have been waiting for you. Come, enter." And Buddha replied, "How can I come in when others have not reached bliss? It doesn't seem to be the right time. How can I enter when the whole has not yet entered? I will have to wait. It's just as if my hands have reached for the gate and my feet have not yet arrived. I will have to wait. Just the hand cannot enter alone." In this story Buddha expresses his deep compassion for others, his greatness of heart.

"Maybe, the most noticeable work of the Gospel of Jesus in our lives is the creation of a greater heart."ⁱⁱⁱ Maybe the creation of a greater capacity to love and to work through difficult human emotions and, finally, to have empathy and compassion when things don't go as planned—maybe that's the greatest gift of Christ to us.

Over the journey of our lives, maybe we can become less angry. Maybe we can become less hostile. We can become just a little less judgmental and accusatory. Maybe we can become just a little more honest. We can become just a little more respectful of others. Maybe we can become just a little bit more compassionate. Maybe we can become just a little bit more like the persons Christ has been inviting us to become all along.

Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Luminous Web*, Cowley Publications, Boston, c. 2000, page 79

ⁱⁱ Ibid, page 79

ⁱⁱⁱ *Year A, Epiphany 6, Synthesis*, Anonymous Source, February 16, 2020, p. 4