

But I Say to You...

One of my teachers at Duke Divinity School told us a story from his time as a bishop in the United Methodist Church. Part of a bishop's duties is the regular evaluation of the clergy under their oversight. One year a minister whose work had drawn the attention of this particular bishop declared in advance of his review that he was not subject to the bishop's judgment because "only Jesus Christ can judge my ministry."

The bishop replied, "Son, I think you'll do a lot better with me as your judge than with Jesus Christ." After all, the worst a bishop's going to do is send you for training, or move you to another parish; but the consequences of Jesus' judgment can be a lot more serious.

Well, it certainly seems so in today's Gospel reading where Jesus warns of hellfire as a consequence for what we think of as pretty common, everyday sorts of sins and failings.

After all, how many of us have been touched by divorce? How many of us have ever had a lustful thought for someone that is not our spouse? How many of us have ever been angry with someone? Is there anyone here who isn't included in this list that Jesus lays out here? Right, we are all sinners here.

So, what's going on here? Is Jesus just setting some impossibly high standards here and saying, Sorry, if you fall short you're going to hell? The last verse of last Sunday's Gospel reading has Jesus saying, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." It certainly seems like Jesus is taking a very hard line with us.

In a way, that is what Jesus is doing. He's making a distinction between the ways of the world—the Law, human forms of justice—and the ways of God, the ways of the kingdom. It's like the story I just told about the judgment of the bishop versus the judgment of Jesus: the notion that human standards of justice are different than God's standards, and often less severe than God's standards.

And Jesus is pushing back against that. He says, You have a law against murder. Well, that's a pretty easy one to abide by. There are few, if any, people here this morning who are guilty of murder. If that's the law then most of us can breathe a sigh of relief and say, Not guilty! We're off the hook; we are innocent.

But then Jesus takes that ancient law—Thou shalt not kill—and he *intensifies* it. He says that God's

intention is not just that we don't kill each other—it's not enough that we restrain ourselves from killing one another even as we live with a kind of mutual hostility, like a kind of Cold War. God's intention is that we do not hate one another; God is concerned with the inclinations of our hearts. It's not enough that we don't kill.

Now we're not off the hook; now the teaching applies to probably everyone here today. All of us at one point or another have been angry with someone. And then Jesus proceeds through his list, in perhaps a decreasing order of severity. So while there are few if any murderers amongst us, there are perhaps a few here who have committed adultery, and a larger number still who have been divorced.

The general effect of this teaching is to widen it out so that we are all included; we are all addressed by Jesus in this teaching.

So, again, why does Jesus do this? Is he just trying to get us to feel badly about ourselves? No, of course not. I think what Jesus is trying to get us to do is to not count on our own righteousness; so that we don't say, Well, I'm not guilty of *that* so I'm okay. He's taking away the wiggle room that allows us to make a distinction between ourselves and others, that marks us as "good" or "innocent" and others as "not so good" or "guilty."

It's a version of what Jesus says elsewhere when he says, Let the one without sin throw the first stone. We are all sinners here.

Now, we tend to not like to hear that sort of thing in our church tradition because it does tend to make us feel bad. It goes against our desire for affirmation and encouragement. It seems to belittle us and discourage us, and talk down to us.

This kind of language seems to cast us in the role of dependent, and disobedient children, and we prefer to think of ourselves as competent and capable adults, able and willing to solve all the world's challenges.

But Jesus doesn't call us sinners to make us feel bad. Jesus calls us sinners to get us to wake up, to be honest about all the little and big sins that we prefer to paper over. As long as we are blind to our sins, we are stuck in them. As long as we think it's okay to let anger at another take up residence and fester away in our hearts, we are kept from being all that God created us to be. God wants us to be free from our anger and hatreds.

Similarly with the teachings about marriage. Jesus is saying it's not enough to just say, Well, I didn't cheat on my spouse. Jesus is pushing us to contemplate our positive obligations in the marriage covenant, so that we might experience the fullness of what that experience has to offer. He's not trying to rub our noses in our very real and very human failures; he's wanting us to deepen our experience of what marriage can be.

Again and again, the teaching is, It's not enough to not do wrong; we're called to imagine what doing right

looks like. It's back to that notion that our standards are not as rigorous as God's standards.

This is where it gets tough. Because we can't just go through our checklist and say, I didn't kill anyone; I didn't do this; I didn't do that; so I'm okay, I'm good with God. Instead we're called to this active commitment to doing right in the world. We are called to reconcile with our enemies, to respect one another, and to honor our commitments.

We're called to meet a higher standard, what seems like an impossibly high standard. What are we sinners to do?

Our faith story tells us that what is impossible for us is possible for God. That we are called to let go of our own standards of judgment, our own sense of righteousness, and be drawn into God's ways. On our own we can't do it, but Jesus shows us what is possible with God, and God's Spirit empowers us to do what God calls us to do.

So, to widen this out a bit, as we look at the world around us, and we see things like the horrific civil war that continues to grind on in a place like Syria; or at the ongoing political repression in a place like Iran; we can't just let ourselves off the hook and say, We're sorry, but it's not really our problem. We didn't cause those troubles; it's nothing to do with us.

No—instead we welcome refugees from those places, and we pray that God will move in the hearts of leaders in those places, so that they

change their policies. Some of us join efforts at letter-writing and campaigning for political prisoners, to raise awareness, and hopefully, secure their freedom.

These actions are motivated by an awareness that we are all in this together, and that we are ultimately judged not just on whether we have kept our noses clean, but on the breadth of our mercy and compassion.

Closer to home, our United Church of Canada is committed to a process of reconciliation with our Aboriginal sisters and brothers, amid the legacy of colonialism and residential schools.

Again, we might say, What has that to do with me? I wasn't part of that. We might say, I'm not racist; I've got nothing against First Nations people. But again, it's not enough to say, I didn't do any harm; God calls us to do right. In this case, God calls us to walk the road of reconciliation, to work towards the wholeness of God's shalom.

I want to close with a video from our national church, that traces our recent history with Aboriginal peoples, including the apology that the church made in 1986, and the Aboriginal peoples' response to that apology.

After the video, we'll stand and sing a song of commitment and dedication to the way of Jesus.

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