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Years ago, we nicknamed one of my nieces “the attorney general.” She was about four years old and as legalistic as a tiny person could possibly be. When told that she could ride her tricycle only in the driveway, she wanted to know if the front wheel could touch the dividing line with the street when she turned around. And what about her shadow, if that went into the street was she disobeying? If so, riding at different times of day would imply different rules — and a cloudy day would throw confusion over the whole system! It would have done her mother no good to cite Sirach saying “If you choose, you can obey and it will save you.” The child sought razor-sharp precision, intent on getting away with all she could, only to test the limits. She and her parents had no shared values in the laws of bike riding. For her the rule was nothing but an authoritarian limitation on her freedom. For her parents, it was a matter of preserving her life so that she could survive one day to use her cleverness for better causes.

Our attitude toward the law depends on the reasons we see for it and on our feelings for those who have formulated it. One level of obedience, like my niece’s, is conformity to avoid punishment. That’s purely egoistic; the only reason for following the rule is to keep herself out of trouble. When the potential punishment or risk of being caught diminishes there’s no motivation for observing the law. The lawgiver

thus has to be certain that disobedience appears more costly than compliance.

Today's readings talk about a much different appreciation of divine law. The selection from the Book of Sirach, a collection of Jewish wisdom, claims that obedience to God's law leads to genuine quality of life. The law turns out to be more of a revelation than a demand. As today's responsorial psalm asserts, God's law offers the pathway to a life full of blessing. When we appreciate that following the law of God leads to tranquility, it makes philosophical sense.

When we get to Paul's message the philosophers are invited to bow out. Paul talks about a wisdom that applies to neither the winners of the world nor even the utopian theorists. For Paul, divine wisdom refers to neither legal nor philosophical concepts but comes from knowing the mystery of Christ. Paul understands wisdom as the consciousness that comes from allowing the Spirit of God to enlighten us. It's the result of a relationship of love, and therefore it's impossible to understand outside of the context of being caught up in God's love.

While Paul's approach sounds pretty philosophical, Jesus applies the law of wisdom to the everyday relationships of people in community — and what he says applies as startlingly now as did on the day he first uttered these things. Jesus reminds us that the anger which leads someone to demean a brother comes from the same root as Cain's murder of Abel. And just in case people missed that subtle reference, he doubled down on it by talking about making peace before you presume to offer anything to God, reminding people that the first murder took place in the context of making an offering to God (Genesis 4:2-10). Jesus capped this teaching off with the warning that if we can't figure out how to make peace among ourselves we'll start taking one another to court and end up imprisoned by our own systems of retribution.

When he talks about relationships between the sexes, Jesus avoids judging the picky details and demands due reverence for every person made in God's image. He points out that cultivating lust destroys the heart of the lascivious looker as surely as it devalues the woman who is considered like a carnival attraction. On the question of divorce Jesus tells the audience that if you put someone in an impossible situation, you are responsible for what happens as a result. That's a theory that we might apply today not just to family affairs but to situations like those of former soldiers with PTSD or inner city children stuck in failing schools. Speaking today Jesus might well talk about how much responsibility we have for these very serious

problems. Matthew's sermon on the mount presents Jesus as a new Moses, not as the lawgiver but a guide who shows the way to a life full of blessing. In Deuteronomy 30, Moses told the people that through the covenant, God was offering them life or death, blessing or curse. When Jesus interpreted the Mosaic Law, he refused to get lost in juridical minutiae but went to the heart of the matter. Fulfillment of the law is simply a question of love.

### **SIRACH 15:15-20**

Today's reading from Sirach is part of an exploration of questions of God's omnipotence and omniscience in the face of human free will. The verses which precede today's reading insist that people cannot blame God for their own failures: God created humanity with free will, and they are responsible. In these lines the sage echoes Moses' speech in Deuteronomy 30:11-20 insisting that human beings have the ability to choose good or evil, that which leads to life or that which causes destruction.

This reading and the psalm which follows it present God's law not as a legal system but as a way of wisdom. This approach is far closer to Native American traditions than to the U.S. judicial system.

The second part of the reading offers great comfort to any who seek God's will. In the midst of extolling God's wisdom and power it assures the reader that God comprehends the human heart. "Fear of the Lord" includes the assurance that God watches over beloved humanity and will never ask for anything harmful. The last line can simply be read as a defense of God's law. But far more than that, it assures anyone who suffers injustice that no matter what the aggressor's legalistic claims might be, nothing that does harm to another is the will of God. Regardless of what authorization people in power might claim, they have no license either to injure others or to demand that others do what is not right.

### **1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-10**

Although in other places Paul's compliments to the Corinthians may be ironic, here he's sincere in calling them mature enough to appreciate divine wisdom. They would not be members of this community if they did not have some comprehension of God's countercultural ways. Paul describes the wisdom at the heart of Christianity as

something incomprehensible to the “rulers of this age,” and yet something that the community already grasps as a “mystery.” This implies that they accept it and that as they live into it, they comprehend its truth ever more deeply. The point of this part of the letter is that God’s wisdom is grasped by grace rather than through any intellectual accomplishment. To emphasize that Paul paraphrases and reinterprets Isaiah 64:3 with this statement: “No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you working such deeds for those who wait.”

Paul is picking up on Isaiah’s idea that the eye and ear and heart are receptors of knowledge. We tend to believe in most of what we see, we judge what we hear on the basis of our trust in the source, and while we may not consciously admit it, most of us come to final conclusions under the strong influence of the heart. With his poetic rendering of “eye has not seen ... ” Paul is saying that there is no human sense or resource capable of discerning God’s plan. Only the Spirit of God can reveal God’s heart to limited human beings.

Last week’s reading gave us a glimpse of Paul’s interpretation of conversion as a total reordering of his life and understanding while this selection gives us a sense of the affect involved. Paul’s teaching about the mystery of God’s plan for humanity is not so much about grasping for understanding as it is about being grasped by love. The experience of God’s great love has reordered Paul’s whole being and overridden every other kind of knowledge.

Paul assures us that from the beginning of creation, God’s plan has been to entice us into participation in this mystery. Everything prepared for it until it came to fulfillment in Christ. We can know this only through the influence of the Spirit who communicates from the very depths of God. Paul’s talk about this mystery is nothing short of an invitation to share his mysticism. As he told the Corinthians, he also tells us that in Christ we invited to live this mystery.

### **MATTHEW 5: 17-37**

“Do not think I came to abolish the law but rather to fulfill it.”

Paul often talked about the end of the time of the law but Jesus presented a different perspective. We need to understand Jesus’ sense of the fulfillment of the law within the context of *metanoia* – the turnaround implied by faith in Christ. The disciple who has undergone a radical change of perspective will understand the law and morality

in a new and different way. God's law was never supposed to function like a set of rules demanding conformity; rather, God told the people that the law was near to them, it dwelt in their hearts and would give them life (Deuteronomy 30:12-18). Nevertheless, they did not always take it in. Jesus now offers to show the disciples how to live the law in such a way that it directs their motivation and their perception, their heart and their mind. It is only when the law is a living interior force that people can truly fulfill it. The person who conforms to a law that doesn't spring from the heart is like a dancer who makes all the right moves without interiorizing the rhythm. It's a performance, not a dance. A well-oiled robot could accomplish the same. The moves may be right but they're not graceful.

Each of Jesus' examples springs from the tradition and gives it new life. When he refers to anger against a brother his people will hear references to Cain and Abel, and to Joseph's jealous brothers. They will understand immediately what kind of anger leads to murder, and they will recognize it when they are implicated in the same deadly process. The demand for reconciliation here is stringent — it isn't just to forgive, but to reach out to someone who has something against you — even if you might not think it's your fault! The call to avoid anger thus evolves into a call to cultivate both humility and love for the other over oneself.

On the topic of relations between the sexes, Jesus stood up for vulnerable women. First of all, he said that regarding a woman as an object of pleasure denigrates her personhood. At a time when adultery was considered a crime against the woman's husband, Jesus described both the lascivious gaze and the adulterous act as an offense against the woman herself, pointing out her primary significance in the whole matter. The same holds with the question of divorce. Because only the man could decide on divorce, it often left the woman without any honorable means of support. If a man puts a woman in that position, says Jesus, he will incur the guilt for whatever happens as a result. No man is free simply to wash his hands of a situation that doesn't please him.

Finally, in what may seem to us a much lesser matter, Jesus tells people to stop swearing oaths as if that made their statements more trustworthy. In some cases, legalists of the day had determined certain formulae which rendered oaths null, thereby making them and the word of the person pronouncing them a sham. Such an oath would have no object other than to deceive. But even in general, Jesus left no room for double talk among his disciples — too much would depend on their transparency and commitment.

Each of these pronouncements on the tradition clearly calls for deep commitment and interiority in the fulfillment of the law. They also halt the tendency to triangulation involved in thinking of hurting others as a transgression against heaven more than as mistreatment and disrespect of a brother or sister. When people think of the law primarily as what must be obeyed to stay in good graces with God they miss the entire point of God's love. The commandments are the basis for creating the happiness and community for which God created humanity. Transgressing the law is an offense against God precisely because of the harm it does to the human community. Thinking otherwise makes it sound as if God has a delicate ego that must be treated with great care lest God unleash the full force of divine wrath in punishment. That's an idea that disparages both God and humanity.

Jesus' teachings about human relations described the interactions that characterize the kingdom of heaven. As in the earlier part of this discourse, these are wisdom sayings, not juridical pronouncements. They present a design for living with specific examples that can be applied to other situations as well. What underlies the whole is a profoundly reverential approach to relationships, to our dealings with those with whom we share community or family and those with whom we deal in day to day situations. The real subject of Jesus' teaching here is about the heart we put into every human interaction.

## **Planning: 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**By:** Lawrence Mick

Today's first reading issues a challenge to each of us: "Before man are life and death, good and evil, whichever he chooses shall be given him." We have been given the power to choose, and with that power comes responsibility.

Religion is intended to be a guide to life, to choosing the good so that we can lead fulfilling and joyful lives. Too often, though, religion is seen as stifling life by its rules and demands on our time and money. Much of the challenge of evangelization in our time involves helping people to see that faith offers them positives rather than negatives, that the church is a place that fosters a full and rich life of love and joy.

This is not an easy message to get across, both because of our history as a church focused on laws and rules and because of contemporary condemnations of multiple

groups and issues by many who claim the name of Christian today.

Some people think that the solution is simply to ignore any church law or rule that is inconvenient and make no demands on those who come to us. Today's readings, however, also confront us with the importance of laws and obedience to God's will, so we can't just ignore all rules and commandments. The key is found in the Gospel, where Jesus challenges us to look more deeply into the commandments to see the values that they are trying to preserve. This requires a certain level of maturity, as Paul suggests in the second reading: "We speak a wisdom to those who are mature, not a wisdom of this age."

When we are children, rules need to be rather black and white; at a young age, we are not yet mature enough to evaluate the purpose of the rule or when it might not apply. If we mature in our faith, however, we gain the ability to discern more carefully, to make sure that the purpose of the rule is fulfilled and that the rule is not impeding its own goals.

This kind of discernment is necessary for moral issues, as Pope Francis has indicated more than once. "We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them," he wrote in his apostolic exhortation on the family (Joy of Love #37). The same principle applies to liturgical laws and rules, too. The mature pastor or planner takes time to understand the reason for a law or rule and then strives to fulfill its purpose, even if at times that means adapting the law to a present situation. This is very different from simply ignoring any rules we don't like, as it is very different from unthinking obedience to every rubric. Let us pray for the maturity and wisdom to embrace the law as Jesus did, going beyond the letter of the law to live its values and seek its goals.

## **Prayers: 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

Today's readings build upon last week's focus on expectations. Living the Christian life requires a deep sense of responsibility and a desire to go beyond the minimum of the law. Spiritual maturity and integrity lies somewhere between deadening legalism and a casual approach that mocks the rules and takes pride in "getting

away with it.” We are given the freedom to act responsibly. We pray for the wisdom to discern what that means and to live accordingly.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you came to fulfill the law: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you taught us the meaning of a higher standard: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to hear and live out your hard teachings: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** My friends, let us pray for our sisters and brothers and for the strength to live as we are called live.

**Minister** For the church: that it may support us in the work of living as responsible Christians...we pray,

- For those who teach us by example, who live with integrity and at great personal risk...we pray,
- For those who go beyond what is required to bring about peace and justice...we pray,
- For local, national and global organizations that promote human rights, medical care of the indigent, social and economic justice...we pray,
- For the courage to act responsibly, without fear of how we are perceived or what it may cost us...we pray,
- For those who struggle with how to interpret or apply rules and laws; and for those who rigidly adhere to them...we pray,
- For our parish ministries and the commitment to serve others...we pray,
- For the sick and those in this community who are in need; and for those who have died...(names)...we pray,

**Presider** God who gives us freedom, we pray for the wisdom, strength and courage to live responsibly. Help us when we hide behind the letter of the law or fear acting at an even higher standard. Show us how to live as Jesus taught us to live. We pray in his holy name. Amen.

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