

Transformed Hearts and Lives.

What does God expect of us? Well, obedience to the commandments is one answer that probably wouldn't be too far off the mark. I mean, why else would God have given them to us if he didn't want us to obey them?

In fact, our gospel reading this morning begins with words that seem to reinforce that notion:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” (Matthew 5:17-18).

That makes it seem like obedience to the commandments — to the law and the prophets — is a pretty safe assumption.

However, in the remainder of our gospel reading, Jesus says some things that make me want to question that assumption.

For example, the law and the prophets say that we shouldn't murder. But Jesus says that's not enough. Jesus says we should be about the task of so transforming ourselves, that eventually we are positively disposed towards *all* people.

And then, the law and the prophets say that we shouldn't commit adultery. But Jesus says that's not enough. Jesus says that we should be about the task of so transforming ourselves, that eventually we no longer look at others as objects that we can possess or dispose of at will; that we need to get to that place where we regard all others as equal to ourselves, and as children of God, and as our siblings in God.

Also, the law and the prophets say that if a man wants to divorce his wife, he simply has to give her a certificate of divorce. But Jesus says that's not enough. Jesus says that relationships are too important to treat so casually. Rather, we should be about the task of so transforming ourselves, that we finally

reach that place where we truly treat others the very same way we wish to be treated.

And finally, the law and the prophets say that if you're going to try and mislead someone, don't try to make your falsehood seem more plausible by invoking the name of God, or by invoking heaven or earth as God's possessions. Jesus says that's not enough. Jesus says that we should be about the task of so transforming ourselves, that we become people who naturally speak the truth in love, and so become known to all as truth-tellers.

At this point, it should become clear that simple obedience to the commandments — that is, obedience to “the law and the prophets” mentioned in our gospel reading — is *not* going to be enough.

Because if that's as far as we go — if we think that God's purpose in giving us the commandments is to provide us with guidelines for obedience or disobedience — then what God will end up with is a bunch of people who are “moral accountants”; that is, people who go about keeping a tally of their sins and virtues, and hoping that on the great balance sheet of life the virtues outnumber the vices. And what's worse, we will invariably end up keeping a tally of the sins and virtues of others.

But that not enough for Jesus, because that's not what God intended. The fact is, the commandments were never meant to be an end unto themselves; rather, they were meant to be *a means to an end*. And that end that God seeks are transformed hearts and lives.

In fact, what God seeks are hearts and lives that have been so transformed, that they no longer have any need of the commandments. That's what St. Paul was talking about in his letter to the Christians in Rome. At the 14th verse of the second chapter, Paul writes:

“When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts.”

And that is what God hopes and desires for each and every one of us: to be people who have the law and the prophets — who have the commandments — written on our hearts; and then, to be people who naturally behave accordingly.

You see, the goal of the Christian faith was *never* to save humanity, or to try to get everyone into heaven when this life is over; that was something God accomplished on the Cross.

Rather, the goal of the Christian faith is to guide humanity along a path — a path that *begins* with obedience to the law and the prophets — but to guide us along a path whose ultimate destination is a completely transformed humanity; to return us to the Garden of Eden; to restore us to the image and likeness of God; to bring about the kingdom of heaven ... on earth.

I want to conclude my remarks by reading to you a brief story that you've probably already heard many times. (In fact, I understand this story made an appearance on Facebook.) But it bears repeating.

An old Indian grandfather is teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he says to the boy. "It is a terrible fight, and it is a fight between two wolves.

"One wolf is evil — he is anger, envy, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.

"The other wolf is good — he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.

"The same fight is going on inside of you, the grandfather says, and inside every other person, as well."

The grandson thought about that for a minute, and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

And the old man simply replied, "Whichever wolf you feed."

In other words — and to quote the first verse of our reading from Sirach: "If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice."

Let us pray: O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Book of Common Prayer, page 815*)