

Breaking the Bars

Today's Gospel reading is a continuation of the first part of the Sermon on the Mount. In last week's reading, Jesus told His listeners that their righteousness must exceed, or surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees. At first reading, it seems as if Jesus is saying that we have to be 'better' than the scribes and Pharisees, two of the most devout groups in the Jewish religion at that time. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus seems to be telling us that not only must we follow the 10 Commandments from a literal point of view, but also in a figurative way. Even if we say a bad word about someone else behind their back, maybe spreading a rumor about them, then we are killing their character which is just as bad as physically killing them. So, it seems as if Jesus is raising the bar of acceptable behavior, behavior which we must follow if we want to enter the kingdom of heaven.

But, as I mentioned in last week's sermon, I do not think that this is what Jesus is really saying. Last week, I mentioned that when we consider all of Jesus' teachings and actions, then Jesus was not really raising the bar, but breaking the bar. Throughout history, societies had defined who was in and who was out of that particular society. To be a member of that society, there were expectations that needed to be met, rules that had to be followed. If you did not follow those rules, then you were not a part of that society and were therefore outside of society. All societies have taken a kind of 'us versus them' perspective in determining the make-up of their society. Even within society, there were usually circles of being a part of that society. The closer to the center of that circle, the more you followed the rules and generally, the more 'power' you had, however power happened to be defined. The further away from the center, the more dissimilar you were from those who defined that society. Barriers were then set up which helped to define where in society individuals belonged and rules were set that dictated how one could cross those barriers and 'rise' within the society

and have more power. Some societies did not allow any change in status while other societies were more fluid and going from one class to another was easier. There were also 'rules of engagement' for dealing with those who were outside the society.

When we look at Jesus' actions, many of those taboos that people were not supposed to do in Jewish society, Jesus did. In Jewish society, the notion of clean and unclean was prevalent and the unclean would make the clean unclean and not the other way around. However, whenever Jesus broke a bar of taboo, He did not become unclean, rather the person who was unclean became clean. We see this with the woman who was bleeding for years and the lepers whom Jesus touched all became clean while Jesus did not become unclean. By not becoming unclean, Jesus showed that this artificial barrier that separated people from getting the help which they really needed was being withheld. In essence, Jesus saw them as a person who was in need, not as something, as an object which had to be avoided.

Another example of what seems like raising the bar but is actually breaking it are the verses which Jesus talks about adultery. In our text, Jesus says that even if a man looks at a woman lustfully, then he has committed adultery in his heart. A literal interpretation of this had led former President Jimmy Carter to admit to this 'sin.' However, instead of raising the bar to expand the definition of adultery, Jesus is actually telling us that we are not to objectify another person, think of them as a 'something' from which we can obtain pleasure for ourselves. Without going through all the examples which Jesus gives, the point is made that we are not to think and treat another person for our own advantage.

As you will recall, the 10 Commandments are about relationships. The first three commandments are about our relationship with God and the last 7 commandments are about interpersonal relationships. The basic gist of these seven commandments is that we are not to have a relationship from which one person gains an advantage over the

other person. God tells us that if we follow these commandments, then we will be blessed to the thousandth generation. In today's first reading from Deuteronomy, we heard the ending of Moses' last teachings to the Israelites before they were to enter the Promised Land. He states the choice before them rather starkly, as plain as it could be. The Israelites have a choice, as a society, to follow the teachings from God and have a long prosperous life in the Promised Land or if they do not follow these teachings, then their time in the Promised Land will be short. Clearly stated options for the people with the consequences also clear - life or death. While they said that they would follow the teachings of the Lord, we know from the Biblical story that they did not, just as we do not follow the teachings of the Lord which we claim to follow. Throughout history, whenever humanity has chosen a path that is self-serving at the expense of others and causing others to suffer in many ways, the story ends poorly. But those times when we do follow the path which God desires us to follow, everybody is blessed beyond our imaginations. Though we see that this is usually short-lived as individuals become selfish, convinced that these blessings will not last so they try to grab more for themselves for when the blessings stop, for when a 'blessing drought' comes along, not realizing that it is actually this kind of behavior that causes the blessings to stop flowing.

Throughout the Biblical story, God has tried to get humanity to follow the way that leads to life. I had once heard that the 10 Commandments are like a fence around a pasture in which we inhabit. They set the perimeter, the boundaries of actions that God has deemed to be acceptable. Within the fence, there are lush pastures, sparkling watering holes which never go dry and plenty of the best food to sustain us. However, humanity prefers to go to the limit, to see what is beyond, believing that the 'grass is greener on the other side;' believing Satan's lie that God is not telling us and giving us everything, that God is actually withholding something from us. When we go to the

other side of the fence, we realize that the other side of the fence actually is a wilderness, we realize that we have been sold a bill of goods, been victims of a bait-and-switch game where nothing that was promised was ever given. We not only lost everything we had, but more, leaving us with a gaping hole within our being and a desire to get back to the other side of the fence. After we had been on the other side of the fence, we realize that the side in which God put us there was more than enough for everyone.

In today's Gospel reading, at first reading it seems as though Jesus is raising the bar in what is acceptable behavior before God. However, as we dig a little deeper, we see that instead of making it harder by raising the bar, Jesus is making it easier by breaking all the barriers that separate from God and from each other. We also see that it is humanity that has erected the bar, making them barriers between people, between societies that keep each other from coming together. Jesus wishes us to see each other as a child of God, not as an object for our own gratification. By knowing how Jesus fulfills the understanding of God's teachings, we realize that instead of looking at the fence and lamenting at what we are supposed to not do and turning around to see the pasture that God has given us and the better one that is promised to us, we no longer see the law as prohibitions, but rather as a way to make life more meaningful and blessed for everyone.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/YkiyE6COTNc>

Service: https://youtu.be/Vsx_A24NR1o