

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany • February 13, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Matthew 5:21-37

“Follow Me: Out of the Dark”

Winter can be a great time of year, especially if you enjoy snow sports and hot beverages. The big downside of this season, though, is the dark: the days seem far shorter, with dusk coming on strong well before dinnertime. The mornings can be a struggle, too, if you're like me and find it hard to get up and get going when it's still pitch black when you look out the window as you're trying to wake up. In those hours when the light is dim, everything seems to blend together: the world looks like just so many shades of gray. But even on wintery days, when you thought that the sun was already out and shining, you might be driving down the road when – suddenly – the sun truly breaks through. Out of nowhere, it seems, the sun shines out and brings real clarity to the day, striking a clear contrast between light and dark as if etching the shadows of the trees onto the ground around you. And with the revelation of once-muted colors, the sun even projects something like joy into the middle of winter.

Jesus is doing just that in today's Gospel text, which continues Matthew's recording of the Sermon on the Mount. He's enlightening the meaning of the scriptures, teaching his disciples and showing them God's original intent for His Law, His instruction given to the ancient people of Israel so long ago. Jesus isn't teaching like the rabbis, who could only point back to the prophets and the other teachers who had come before them (“You have heard that it was said...”). Jesus is speaking with real authority – divine authority – speaking for God, because he *is* God (“But I say to you...”). And teaching his disciples, Jesus brings out the wide-ranging impact of God's instruction. The issues that Jesus addresses are broad and are not limited to specific situations: these apply to every single one of his hearers.

Jesus' words came as a revelation to those that listened to him, because the people had thought they'd already had these topics figured out. In the Judaism of Jesus' time, people lived with something like a tidy “containment” of the dark aspects of what was in the mind and heart; they defined the scope of where the darkness would go. Take murder, for example: of course, to physically kill someone was wrong, and who would do that? They were good people, righteous, even. People that committed murder should indeed face judgment! Isn't that what it says in God's law? And adultery: as long as you weren't going out and having sexual relations with another man's wife or another woman's husband, you're doing OK; there seemed to be a pretty clear-cut definition for sexual purity. Divorce wasn't that big of a deal, as long as you went about it in the proper way. Should a man wish to divorce his wife for any reason –say, he had lost interest in her, or they just weren't “in love” anymore – all he needed to do was to provide her with a certificate that stated (almost literally), “Consider us divorced and yourself a free woman; you can go and marry another man,” and it was all good. When it came to the taking of oaths, the people had established a kind of ranking system for the promises that they made and assurances that they gave. Depending on the witness that someone invoked in giving their word, you could get a sense of the seriousness of the pledge that they were offering. As Jesus notes, people would even swear by their own heads, a practice that devalued the word of promise itself while overestimating the speaker's own importance. The people saw a division between thoughts and actions, imagining guidelines that would keep the dark in the human heart and mind contained, keeping people free from contamination by that darkness.

But what does God really want us to know about these things? What does God want us to know about the dark that we find in our world, even in our own minds and hearts? Jesus tells us that downplaying the darkness that we would harbor in ourselves is deadly. These are truly life and

death issues, as we heard in our first reading today. In that passage from Deuteronomy, God is calling the people to faithful living before they enter into the land that He promised to their ancestors. God lays out a blessing for His people in calling them to live under His instruction, that they may know life; doing otherwise, choosing the dark, leads towards death. Darkness is toxic, poisonous, and it will be fatal. Eventually, it leads to physical death, but the even bigger problem is spiritual death. In God's sight, contamination – in mind and heart, in thought and action – merits the most severe punishment possible: separation from His presence.

So what about us and our lives today? I think that it's fair to say that we live with containment. We make it our practice to compartmentalize our thoughts and actions. We often live out the mindset of "a little's not too bad," an attitude that assumes that you can consume pretty much anything – "within reason," of course – without it contaminating you, without your choices having any negative impact on your life. This cultural complacency is very much a part of the time and place in which we live. Where does our attention dwell? On what do we find ourselves focused?

Do you dwell in the dark, allowing yourself even a bit of the things that Jesus calls out? Have you harbored anger and allowed hate to rest in your thoughts and emotions, or insulted someone else – especially a brother or sister in the faith – to hurt them? Have you seen someone and said (or thought), "Numbskull!?" Have you gazed with lustful thoughts at an attractive man or woman, letting your look linger, or cared little about the value of marriage as God's gift, either for yourself or for your friends and family? Have you ever engaged in "situational honesty," being a little flexible with the truth or with your promises, even with the best of intentions?

If you have harbored *any* darkness, you're deathly contaminated: there are no shades of gray about it! In doing these things, Jesus tells us, we are going against God's design for life. Even darkness "contained" in our minds and hearts – even if it is not acted out – is toxic. We're in a bad way!

I enjoy snowboarding when I get the chance to do it. I'm heading out to Colorado for vacation this week, and I'm looking forward to a little time on the slopes. One of the things that I've come to learn about snowboarding is that your neck is really important. You might wonder why. Isn't there a whole lot going on in between the board and your neck? Well, here's the thing: your neck plays a huge role in setting your direction. Where you look is where you'll likely go. Last year, I was taking a lesson when my instructor asked me if I wanted to ride through some nearby trees. Seeing my less-than-enthusiastic expression, he shared the following bit of advice: "A lot of people make the same mistake when riding through the trees: they look at the trees. **Don't look at the trees.** Look at the space in between the trees, keep focused in that direction and you'll ride through just fine." Our lives are a lot like that. When we linger on the darkness, looking at the trees – bam! – we're in a bad way.

Hear this **good news** today: Jesus takes your contamination, the darkness in your mind and heart, onto himself and leaves you cleansed, forgiven, pure. **That's what happens on the cross.** This is why we proclaim Christ, and him crucified. In Jesus, we have forgiveness for the stumbling and falling in the dark that we've done in our lives. And what's more, the Holy Spirit's power even reaches down to your neck! You are no longer locked into looking at the darkness. The Spirit turns you to look at Jesus, to follow him as he calls you **out of the dark**. Don't dwell in the dark! When tempted, when the things of darkness come to you and say, "A little isn't too bad," look to Jesus and what he has done for you on the cross; remember that he has made you clean and set you free to live in his light.

Even in the middle of the winter, when the snow covers the ground and the sky takes on a hazy shade of gray, the light of Jesus breaks through in the lives of his people, those he calls to follow him. Looking to him as the light of your life, may you enjoy the power over darkness that he brings. Amen.