
Can You Meet Jesus' Standards?

[Click here for the podcast.](#)

A sermon by the Reverend Canon Elizabeth Knowlton
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
Matthew 5:21-27

When I was a child, I took the moral formation of my younger sister rather seriously. Becky is almost five years younger than I am, so it was easy to imagine how advanced of her in the ways of the world I was. I believed she was lucky to have me around to expand her horizons. At ten years old, I thought being a good person was all about learning the rules and following them to the letter. At five years old, she still believed in magic and was not sure there even needed to be rules that would limit her freedom. Certainly, not mine.

At times, I had noble motives. When I encouraged her to place her beloved security blanket in the trashcan on trash day---- without my mother's knowledge, it was not out of spite or malice. I really had a genuine desire to help her "stop being such a baby." But there were the other occasions, when like many older siblings, I was flat out manipulative. One that causes immediate laughter between us, as adults, was the infamous case of the magic water, or MW as we came to call it.

The premise was rather simple. I decided it would be helpful to have a method of enlisting my sister's service without any need to negotiate. She would become a better person through my direction, and I would have the convenience of a compliant servant. Since she couldn't have been much older than five or six, I told her I was in possession of some magic water. It would have amazing properties and change her life forever. I would be willing to share it with her, but only if she agreed to follow my strict instructions. The commands had to be followed without question or the magical effects of the water would instantly disappear.

I can still see her innocent face nodding, like Jack about to purchase his handful of magic beans, as I explained the procedure to her. I handed her the small bottle of tap water I had prepared and told her when she was ready, she could drink it. I looked solemnly at her after she swallowed it and told her, I could see it was already working. She danced off happily to wait for its effects.

I'm not sure to this day what the effects were that she experienced, but she believed something had happened. So, for some period of time, whenever I needed something fetched or a chore completed, I would look at Becky, make my request, raise my left eyebrow and say, MW. She would then rush off to accomplish my bidding. It was great.

Jesus said, "Do not think I come to abolish the Law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill."

These words from last week's lectionary are a necessary precursor to the listing of admonishments we hear from Jesus this morning. How is this list of prescriptions a fulfillment of the law and the prophets? Are we free from rules or subject to even greater requirements?

At first blush Jesus sounds like the new sheriff in town. He is not going to only enforce the Ten Commandments, but be vigilant about anything that might lead us in any direction of their violation. Not only do we have to worry about avoiding

murder, adultery, and false oaths, we are cautioned about anger, separation, and inappropriate thoughts. Are we being asked to never be angry again, never to find ourselves separated from another person, or have an inappropriate thought towards the opposite sex?

I hope that is not what our fulfillment of the law looks like, or I imagine there are a number of us who might be in a bit of trouble. It is hard to imagine that we have traded the Ten Commandments for an even more stringent set of rules that will prevent us from ever going astray from the will of God. If we could accomplish this way of living we would have gotten rid of the corporate confession long ago.

Yet, we cannot just sidestep these words because they feel too difficult or uncomfortable either. To sugar coat the demands of Jesus is to treat grace as a magic vial of water that allows us to dance carefree without any transformation. Or, to check our brains at the door and treat God like an older sibling who can now direct our every movement. To ignore the caution in these words is to fundamentally underestimate the difficulty of loving well.

Like many of us, I have followed the news of Egypt closely in the past weeks. I have ridden the emotional ups and downs of the people there. I have heard their cries for greater freedom and prayed for the stability of any regime change that might come. We now know a historic transition is underway. We have watched the celebrations on Tahrir square and started to wonder what is next. It will be for the people of Egypt to determine what their future is, but its evolution will have long lasting impact on the region and the world.

On Friday, at one point during the coverage I heard, amidst singing and celebration there was a young voice that came across my radio. The young man in a moment of jubilation said, "It is great. We are finally free. We can now do whatever we want!"

We all know better. In fact I assume he already knows better as his euphoria has subsided. Freedom if it is true and long lasting, political or personal, is never devoid of structure. It must be balanced with rule or law. Throughout the ages, Christians have debated what the role of the law should be in a life assured of mercy and grace. Even the term law though can be ambiguous. Do we mean the Ten Commandments? Do we mean every jot and tittle in Book of Leviticus? And how does our modern understanding of the law and regulation complicate our hearing?

To follow the demands of Torah was not meant to be an unobtainable burden for God's chosen people. It was seen as a privilege. It gives us a manner of life that forms people deeply in the ways of God. It gives the promise of a life of Shalom, which is more than an absence of conflict, but peace and wholeness.

When Jesus critiques those followers of the law who have lost the forest for the trees, we need to see our own complicity in our search for easy formulas or magical cures in our religious lives. The very fact that we know we will fall short, become angry and separated from one another should remind us that we can no more fulfill the law than the most committed Pharisee.

Jesus said, "Do not think I come to abolish the Law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill.

It is Jesus that has come to fulfill, not us. Fulfillment on our part looks a good deal more messy. But it is our very messiness that draws us closer to Jesus. It is only through his mediation that we are able to catch glimpses of holy love for one another. It is not about our own ability to achieve perfection, but rather a willingness to tolerate our own imperfections and those around us so that we can acknowledge a need for the reconciling love of God.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen tells a story about her own struggles with perfectionism in her book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*. She says,

"Life offers us many teachers and many teachings. One of mine was David, who was an artist and my first love. The living proof that opposites attract. While we were together, my driver's license came up for renewal. And I needed to take a written test of the traffic laws.

The DMV had sent a little booklet. I studied it for days. All the while I was memorizing the meaning of the white curb and the yellow curb, David would try to persuade me to join him for a walk or to go to a party or out to dinner or dancing or even just to talk. I told him I couldn't take the time. Of course I got 100% on the test. Triumphant, I rushed into his studio shouting that I had gotten 100% on my driving test. David looked up from his painting with an expression of great tenderness. "My love," he said, "why would you want to do that?"

Jesus said, "Do not think I come to abolish the Law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill."

Amen

© The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.