

“JESUS, THE AGGRAVATOR”

A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, January 12, 2017

Text: Matthew 5:21-37

I am confused. Will the real Jesus please stand up?

Is the real Jesus that angry prosecutor standing behind verse 22a: “But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment”?

Or is it the helpful mediator who authored verse 24: “First be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift”?

What if the real Jesus is that suspicious fellow behind verse 28?

How awful it would be if a cruel, even sadistic Jesus lurks behind verse 29 and 30!!!

Or is the real Jesus the pragmatic guru who stands behind verse 37?

Jesus says some very difficult things in this passage. Since they are not consistent with what we are used to hearing from him, we might even wish to deny that Jesus really said any of these things. Perhaps someone was co-opting Jesus’ authority to send a clear moralistic signal?

You know what to do when Jesus tells us to be kind. You ask “How high?” But what are you supposed to think and do and say when Jesus comes off as the great Exacerbator, aggravating our situation which is already bad enough! When he lays down one impossible command and directive after another!

We all agree that much is wrong with our world. But how do we make it all right? Surely the sort of extreme measures Jesus calls for would make matters worse, not better? They would exacerbate the situation, not improve it!

Is this the truth about Jesus, that he came to make things harder for us? To make our situation more desperate? To make us give up hope? As someone once said to Jesus, “Who then can be saved?” Are you and I among the listeners Jesus talked about who “hear, but do not understand”?

Let me cut to the chase:

The real Jesus is hidden in verses 24 and 25. The real Jesus, the savior of the world, our redeemer, the one you can actually sing hymns to, is the one who suggests we “come to terms with our accuser,” and “be reconciled to our brother or sister.” Jesus does not want us to suffer injury or judgment. He wants to heal and save.

But if that is the case, as we believe it is, what shall we do with Jesus the Aggravator?

Jesus, the Aggravator, does a few things with his extreme dictates. First, he stops us from smugly comparing ourselves to others and calling ourselves “good.” You who are angry without cause, you are not “better” than murderers. You are similar. You who never commit adultery, you are not better than those who do. You are in the same boat. You who cover yourselves with a “certificate of divorce,” you are not any different from those who cheat. You are just like them.

Secondly, he forces us to ask whether we really care about being righteous more than anything. Would we really cut off anything more than fingernails or hair if that’s what it took to be righteous? No, our instinct for self-preservation would kick in, and we would settle for not being perfect.

The purpose of those two steps is to drive us towards the one who is our Accuser, the one with whom we need to be reconciled: God.

Jesus thus puts all humanity in one boat. One leaky boat. We don't like that. We would rather segregate ourselves from people who do evil. We want to label bad people "them." Not possible, says the Aggravator. Jesus the Aggravator tells us to face the truth about ourselves.

But then he tells us that when we are accused, we should do something about it. Come to terms with the accuser. Be reconciled to our brother or sister.

How can we do that?

That is where Jesus the Savior kicks in. Jesus, the Son of Man who came not to condemn but to deliver.

There is no deliverance in this passage, of course, no actual gospel. But this is just the beginning of his work. He was preparing people for the Gospel. Soon enough, Jesus would provide the specific terms of reconciliation. For now, he needed to help people find their coram.

Your "coram" is the person or persons you are living your life before. Your public. Your audience. The ones whose opinion matters. The people you're trying to impress. Your "coram" could be your parents, your children, your nation, God, even yourself.

Before Jesus can reconcile people to God or help us come to terms with God, he needs to help us see that, in fact, we "live before God." God is not our only public, but he is certainly our most important "public," or else God is not our God. God is the one before whom we walk. "In him we live, and move, and have our being." (Acts 17:28)

In our first reading two weeks ago, Micah asked "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" Not just "walk humbly." But walk

humbly "with your God." God demands to be our coram, our public.

What difference does it make, that we walk our walk not only "coram hominibus" (with people for an audience) but "coram deo" (beneath the watchful eye of God)? Not just in the presence of people, but of God?

1) God sees our hearts. People don't. People infer what is in our hearts, from our behavior. God actually looks at our hearts. And judges, because God has that right. That's why we call God "God."

2) God judges us according to God's law: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart." "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

But even in making clear that God is our true "coram," Jesus was still only aggravating matters. Because God is certainly harder to please than Mom.

But Jesus has a plan to save us before we even get to the judge. He plans to help us "come to terms quickly" with our accuser, while we are on the way to court. Through the forgiveness of our sins Jesus is going to take the handcuffs off and release us into the world as people whose righteousness, by virtue of the forgiveness of our sins, is greater than the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. We don't need to self-mutilate. We don't need to scapegoat others. We are not required to spend hours in deep remorseful introspection searching the corners of our thoughts words and deeds for something else to be sorry about. We have Jesus on our side. If he is our defender, who cares about worldly detractors?

The lesson is this: When you are perusing Scripture and you encounter this Jesus, the Aggravator who makes us feel worse about ourselves by showing us deeper truths about ourselves, keep reading. Keep reading. Until you get to the Jesus who accomplishes what he came to accomplish among us by freeing us from sin and death and giving us the kingdom.

Amen.