

Introduction to Deuteronomy 30:15-20:

Central to all of today's readings are Israel's Ten Commandments. To 'set the stage' for the morning, then, a reminder about broad cultural dynamics addressed by those Commandments.

It must always be remembered that the Near East (like the Middle East and Far East beyond it) [the Near East] is a patriarchal Honour-Shame culture. Within that world view, every social exchange between a man (together with his family behind him) and another man (with his family behind him) is potentially if not likely confrontational. If something about words spoken or actions taken even hints at a 'hit' on the other man's or family's honour, it is then socially necessary for 'the other' to react with words or actions that hit back.

This is a situation that easily and quickly can escalate. Feuds between families can not only grow but become entrenched from generation to generation. Strikes back-and-forth can easily blossom to killing 'for honour's sake'. (By the way, the execution of Jesus, by Temple and state, is rightly viewed using this very lens. But back to understanding the society at large ...) The role and genius of the Ten Commandments are that they (particularly the last five) [they] nip feuding in the bud, stopping what could otherwise become internally-generated group annihilation.

The decisiveness and finality of the 'nipping in the bud' are pretty clear: For all except the Commandments not to covet or steal, the punishment in Old Testament Law is death. Idolatry, blasphemy, Temple defilement, infraction against Sabbath observance, dishonouring one's parent, adultery, murder, kidnapping, and bearing false witness, all led to the death of the perpetrator. And, with that, potential escalation of feuding was ended.

(By the way, the sentence for stealing was restitution plus a 20% penalty, which was seen as ‘justice met all around’.)

With this reminder about the functioning and severity of the Ten Commandments, here is the setting for today’s Old Testament reading: Near the end of their 40 year wilderness trek, speaking to the whole people of Israel, Moses has completed his ‘full disclosure’ declaration of God’s covenant (its stipulations, laws, blessings and curses, all built upon the Ten Commandments). We find ourselves in the solemn ceremony whereby the people shall take upon themselves a vow of obedience to the covenant. At the moment of final decision, Moses exhorts with these words:

Sermon: Fulfilling the Law and the Prophets

A characteristic of Jesus’ ***entire*** life and ministry, seen through Matthew-the-Gospel-writer’s eyes, is one we heard Paula read and preach about last week. Jesus comes right out and states it just four verses prior to today’s reading: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.” And Jesus delivers *immediately*: ***Today’s*** Gospel reading, you may have already picked up, ***is*** Jesus’ teaching about ***fulfilling*** (or “completing”) Commandments numbers ...

3- You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain;

6- You shall not murder; and

7- You shall not commit adultery.

In the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, if we were to read on, we’d hear Jesus address the others; but for today, we focus on these three.

The ‘left unspoken’ question, *here* (for us whose intention it is to follow Jesus), ***is*** “What are the new dimensions or further measures involved in

Jesus *fulfilling* or *completing* these Commandments?”, which question sets our course for the morning.

It is not a simple thing to answer, and you MacNeill-ites know this is so because *everything* biblical is so bound up in its patriarchal honour-shame culture ... a culture profoundly different from our own.

Let me cut to the chase and suggest an overarching answer, and then come back to look at details. Where (as we noted before our Old Testament reading this morning) [... Where] the Ten Commandments and the Law were about *ending* the ever-escalating back-and-forth manoeuvres to reclaim and regain honour by decisively killing the idolater, blasphemer, adulterer, murderer, kidnapper, or false witness, Jesus offers a way out of the culture's honour-shame stand-offs **without taking satisfaction of any kind.** *This*, in a nutshell, *is his fulfillment / completion of the Law.*

Now back to the details (and a fuller understanding). Jesus' *fulfillment* of “**You shall not murder**” goes: “if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” To flesh out what he means, Jesus gives two practical examples:

1. Your accuser (a fellow believer) is taking you to court because you owe him. For goodness sake, says Jesus, do not lash out at him (don't kill him!), do not even get angry; instead (a) take charge, (b) own up, and (c) come to terms before you ever get to court!
2. You are at the Jerusalem Temple, about to offer your sin offering at the altar, when it comes clear to you that your brother or sister (your fellow believer) *with whom you are at odds* **deservedly** *has something against you.* For goodness sake(!), stop letting your anger brew, leave the offering at the altar so as first to be reconciled to your brother or sister, then afterwards come back to make your offering.

In both cases, ‘owning up’ and de-escalation by the individual – ‘taking the hit’ instead of ‘hitting back’ – mean that *any **religious or judicial or societal** need* to step in and ‘take satisfaction’ has been done away with.

Next we learn Jesus’ fulfillment of “You shall not swear falsely”. This one requires a **bit** more background. “Swearing” means calling God to witness the truth of what is being said. Where that usually happened was in the process of making a sale. Remember that there were no systems to **regulate** *let alone enforce* standards (no building codes or CSA!); so it was always a seller’s market. A seller – trying his best to influence the sale – would call out God to witness to the quality of the product, *although without directly using God’s name so as not to blaspheme*, promising (swearing) “by heaven”, “by the earth”, “by Jerusalem”, “by my head” that the goods or animals he’s selling are ‘first rate’. The buyer was supposed to be reassured, for **if** the merchandise was shoddy **then** such an oath would implicitly have taken God’s name in vain, dishonouring God and asking for the penalty (the satisfaction) due upon taking God’s name in vain, and surely (“wink, wink”) no seller would do that(!). Jesus interrupts the whole charade and does away **with any need for later satisfaction**: “Do not swear at all ... Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

Thirdly, we learn Jesus’ fulfillment of “You shall not commit adultery”. This one requires a **lot** more background. We have looked, before, at first century Palestinian marriage, but it is so different from ours that we need reorientation to it more than a few times before it gets and stays clear. You will recall that marriage was not so much between a woman and a man as between two families. The match was made not because two people fell in love but because the women-folk of the two families considered broadly and came up with this as the best honour-enlarging arrangement they could imagine from both sides, and the men folk in turn have agreed that this match makes *altogether* good social, economic

and political sense. Remember too that, in patriarchy, the honour is that of the family, *and* it is held (possessed) by the men (and only the men).

Once two families have become joined by marriage, consider what an ending of that marriage entails. You may recall that in Jesus' day only the husband can call for divorce. (If a wife was being wrongly or badly treated, her redress was through her closest allies *who were **neither** her husband nor anyone in her new family **but rather** her brothers*, who then took up her cause between them and her husband.) When a husband called for a divorce, recognize with me that there were only three possible reasons:

1. [First reason:] His wife has had sex with another man, in which case the public divorce calls shame down on her family of origin (specifically, its men) and on the man (plus his male relatives) with whom she had the affair.
2. [Second reason:] There is another woman whom he wants to marry, in which case a divorce is publicly shaming the men of his current wife's family.
3. [Third reason:] There is something he does not like about his wife, which again publicly shames the men (the father and brothers) in his wife's family.

All of these are profound 'hits' **on whole families' honour standing** and they beg hitting back. We are back to feuding and the threat of society-annihilating escalation! Jesus directs the way forward for his in-group so that there is no need to take satisfaction of any kind: Men in his following are not to look at a woman with lust. Hear again how Jesus emphasizes this:

²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better

for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

Jesus concedes that in the case where a wife has sex with another man, a divorce is possible. But *he decrees, concerning any other reason, that* the male (remember, in that culture, he is the one with power) [the male] would be “causing [his wife] to commit adultery” which is to say he would be “acting as a pimp” and offering her out for sex with other men. And Jesus closes the subject by decreeing that marrying a divorced woman would also be adultery (in that culture) because it dishonours her previous husband who had given up rights to her. Regarding divorce, then, Jesus has gone a long way to ‘clear the field’ of need to take satisfaction.

[Pause]

In a year when Easter comes later, it would be the case that next Sunday the common lectionary would find us hearing *more* ways that Jesus leads his followers to ‘take the hit’ rather than ‘hit back’, the very next example *literally* so: “...[I]f anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

All such Jesus-behaviour runs **counter to the honour-maintaining drives and impulses** that every man and woman, boy and girl in Jesus’ Palestinian audience had been socialized into ever since they were born.

And this *revolutionary* change is built upon what Jesus had taught at the beginning of this Sermon on the Mount: **Contrary (*diametrically opposed!*) to dominant social values, in Jesus’ following, the poor, the bereft, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemaker, those persecuted on Jesus’ account – all those who have taken the hit – they are “bless-ed”. In the dominant culture,**

they are **unable** to defend their positions, **or else** they have **refused** to *take advantage of* the position of others; **they are losers(!), they are lost. Jesus comes along “fulfilling the Law and the prophets” as he declares these people have honour (*ultimate honour!*) granted by God. They are “found”/ “redeemed”/ “saved”! Among Jesus’ in-group, they are valued; these are “the last” now become “first(!)”**.

Today’s broad and deep and gracious Gospel message – Jesus’ “Good News” – is actually pretty straight forward (which is to say “it is quite direct”), and it is **this** [delivered in two parts]: (#1) Followers of Jesus, in whatever time and place and situation we find ourselves, are charged to figure out “taking the hit rather than hitting back” (... the ways of non-escalation and non-violence, including non-violent resistance). *AND*, (#2) followers of Jesus, in whatever time and place we find ourselves, are charged to figure out “the lifting up and honouring of those many children of God whom *our* broader society marginalizes, scape-goats and calls ‘undeserving’”.

Socially, politically, economically, and altogether systemically, how far our world is from this Way!

Socially / politically / economically / systemically **WE FOLLOW JESUS** and – in our choices, our words and our actions, moment by moment – **we make this our Way**. Amen.