



February 16, 2014 Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

"For I say to you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you may never enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." Matthew 5:20

Dear Friends;

Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr, in his book *"YES, AND..."* writes, "To take Scriptures seriously *is not to take them literally*. Literalism is invariably *the lowest and least level of meaning...* Serious reading of the Scripture will allow you to find an ever-new spiritual meaning for the liberation of history, the liberation of the soul, and the liberation of God in every generation...Even more than telling us *what to see* in the Scriptures, Jesus taught us *how to see, what to emphasize, and what could be de-emphasized, or even ignored...* Jesus consistently ignored or even denied exclusionary, punitive and triumphalistic texts in his own Jewish Bible in favor of passages that emphasized inclusion, mercy and honesty...He had a deeper and wider eye that knew what passages were creating a highway for God and which passages were merely cultural, self-serving, and legalistic additions. When Christians pretend that every line in the Bible is of equal importance and inspiration, they are being very unlike Jesus...*Jesus read the inspired text in an inspired way...*"

These thoughts are important as we look at today's Gospel reading. Matthew tells us that Jesus interprets the law so his followers can live honorable lives. Then Jesus' movement can survive and meet the goals of their mission.

The culture of Jesus and the Bible is an honor-shame society. The goal is to preserve honor and avoid shame. The loss of honor brings shame. And shame leads to retaliation. The historical purpose of the Law of Moses was to regulate Israelite behavior. It was to limit the potential annihilation of society as a result of honor-driven blood feuds. (Think of gang violence.) In this society murder, theft (which includes adultery) lying etc. require retaliation. Jesus is offering his followers an honorable way out of situations that can lead to feuds and death. Jesus does this by forbidding anything that could escalate to violence and murder. No name calling. Squelching the feud is even more important than temple worship.

In a society where men and women were strictly separated adultery was impossible to conceal. Most of the time adultery was not the result of passion, but a deliberate attempt of one man trying to shame another. The law called for the death of both parties. The man often escaped and the woman's father and brothers would kill her for shaming *their* family. (This still happens in many parts of the world)

In ancient Middle Eastern society the ideal marriage partners were the first cousins (e.g. Peter's mother-in-law was also his aunt). Divorce would tear the whole village apart. So Jesus says learn to live with your difficulty for the sake of the family and community. Matthew's community like the Jewish community of Jesus' time does allow for divorce. However, Jesus allows it only for serious reason not a frivolous reason. (Orthodox Christianity allows for divorce based on this passage in Matthew).

The context for the comments on lying is the marketplace. There were no government agencies to inspect the quality and honesty of a merchant's claims. A seller would swear indirectly calling on God to witness to his claim about his wares. He would not mention God by name, but say "by the temple" "on my life" etc. However, when he refused to swear by God directly, a fight would break out. Jesus recommends that his followers be honest and direct with each other in the market: yes and no. Our faith calls us to live a qualitatively different way of life.

While our culture is different, the values that Jesus brings to his culture can also be brought to our own: 1) we must promote the common good. Avoid those things which fragment family, community and society. 2) We must not promote, glorify or resort to violence as an answer to problems. We must create a culture that seeks not ceaseless competition but justice and peace. 3) People take precedence over money, legalism and piety. Divine love must be our rule of life.

Peace,

Fr. Ron