

JIMMY, GERALD AND GEORGE

MATTHEW 5:21-37

Epiphany 6 A, February 12, 2017

Brothers and Sisters, we know that our Lord Jesus Christ often teaches the Word of God to us through “**PARABLES**,” those little earthly stories with a heavenly meaning. But St. Matthew would remind us that our Lord Jesus Christ often teaches the Word of God to us also through “**HYPERBOLES**.”

As we said two weeks ago, a “**hyperbole**” is a literary device—**THE PURPOSEFUL EXAGGERATION OF SOME TRUTH—TO MAKE A POINT!** I remember that I even gave you two examples of a hyperbole; such as when you say: “**I’m so hungry, I could eat a horse!**” Or yet again: “I am so busy that I have a **MILLION** things to do today!”

Here are two clear examples of hyperbole in our Gospel lesson today: “***If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away—it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell***” (Matthew 5:29-30)!

Jesus actually uses hyperboles all throughout his Sermon on the Mount; concluding this very sermon of his by asking us pointblank: “***Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but cannot see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first remove the log that is your own eye, and then you will be able to see far more clearly—to help your brother to remove the speck that is in his eye***” (Matthew 7:3-5)!

But how about verses 23-24 that I just read to you? Is it possible that these words are a hyperbole too—when Jesus says to us: “*If when you are offering your gift at the altar—and there remember that your brother has something against you—leave your gift there before the altar and go! First be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift!*”

These words could possibly be hyperbole when we remember that when our Lord Jesus first spoke these words—he was **speaking to his own people—the Jewish people** who would sometimes come from distant cities and distant nations to the Holy City of Jerusalem to offer their live “animal” sacrifices at the temple!

Once they were in the city of Jerusalem, they would purchase a sacrificial animal in one of the outer courts, but how could they possibly bring their **sacrificial animal that far into the temple, that close to the altar, and then simply leave it there unattended, while they went out helter-skelter and yon**, looking for someone who had offended them, or someone whom they had offended—to settle a score and to make amends, before coming back and then presenting their sacrificial animal to the Lord God?

Most of us can probably **not remember a time when we did this literally**, as Christians, even in our day; that after the sermon was preached, and while the offering was being collected, and while Mrs. Bauer was playing her Offertory Music on the organ upstairs, that we then went around the room asking other persons—**FACE TO FACE—FOR THEIR FORGIVENESS AT THE POSSIBILITY THAT WE HAD DONE SOMETHING TO OFFEND THEM**. Maybe when we approach that other person for the sixth or seventh

time, they might say to us: **“No, I am not upset with you, but I am about to get upset with you, if you don’t stop bothering me because you are really starting to get on my nerves!”**

Obviously, there are times when we might actually do something like this, if the **relationship is an extremely important one, like a relationship between a husband and a wife, or children and their parents, or between you and someone else whose friendship** you have dearly treasured for quite some time.

But what I hear Jesus saying to us, above all, is that just as God our Heavenly Father takes the initiative for us to become reconciled to him through the sending of his Son into the world to suffer and die for our sins, that we should take the initiative to do the same in our relationships with others too!

Recently, I wrote a note to someone that I’ll admit was overdue, asking them for their forgiveness for anyway that I may have disappointed them, and I received the nicest note back—saying to me: “No need to ask for forgiveness—because even if you had disappointed me in some way, I would have already forgiven you—because this is what we Christians do—forgive one another as we have been first of all forgiven by our God through the saving work of his only-begotten Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!”

Jesus certainly understood, knew and assumed what we hopefully also understand, know and assume—**THAT WHEN THE BODY OF CHRIST, THE CHURCH, IS HEALTHY—IT CAN RECEIVE, IT CAN SWALLOW, DIGEST, AND ASSIMILATE A THOUSAND BRUISES AND BLUNDERS AND NOT MAKE A BIG DEAL OUT OF IT.** And isn’t this what St. Peter is teaching us also when he says to us in **I PETER 4:8**, *“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins!”*

Four different times Jesus says to us in the Gospel lesson this morning: *“You’ve have heard that it was said to the people of old.... But now I say to you!”*

And here Jesus was in no way contradicting or negating the Old Testament commandments—but he is deepening our understanding of them in every way! Jesus is teaching us that true righteousness is **not simply a matter of our external behavior, but of our thoughts and intentions too.** **Hateful thoughts** left unchecked could eventually lead us into committing the sin of murder. The **endless fantasizing of a husband or wife**—with respect to another person who is not their married spouse—could lead one into the sin of adultery as well!

Abraham Lincoln once said, “Many people think that they are good Christians, if their behavior is such that they stay out of jail!” By this Lincoln means that being a good Christian only involves abstaining from certain actions, rather than doing good deeds to also benefit our neighbor!

You know, as I was studying these words of our Gospel lesson, I couldn’t help but **think back to the 1976 Presidential Race** that took place when I was a senior in college at **Concordia University in Chicago that took place between President Gerald Ford and the former governor of Georgia, Governor Jimmy Carter.**

I'll never forget that when Governor Carter gave that ill-fated interview to a popular Men's Magazine back in 1976 (that will remain unnamed in my sermon today), that when the interviewer asked Mr. Carter for about the umpteenth time—if he believed his strong religious beliefs and convictions as a Southern Baptist would unduly influence any policies that could be established by him in the WHITE HOUSE—that Governor Carter actually ended up launching into a discussion about the fact that he was a sinner saved by the grace of God; and that just as we all have sinned, he too had sinned and committed adultery in his heart looking a little bit too long and too lustfully over certain women, who how shall we say it, had vividly captured his own imagination!

You can be sure that there were people who ridiculed him all throughout our nation—because **they thoughts these words of our Savior were far too extreme!** You know that if people ridiculed Governor Carter back then—we can be most certain—they would ridicule any Christian today who might make this same confession—be they man or woman.

Many of you are aware that the month of **FEBRUARY** has been declared as **BLACK HISTORY MONTH** for 41 years now. It was a decision that was made by the U.S. Congress **but first announced to the American people in a formal way by the 38th President of the United States, by President Gerald Ford** as part of the **Bicentennial Celebration** that was going on in our nation back then in 1976. This is what President Ford had to say: **"I urge the American people to seize this opportunity each year to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history!"**

For years, many political analysis have attributed President Ford's loss to Jimmy Carter in the 1976 Presidential election to the fact that President Ford, less than one month after his being sworn in as the 38th President of the USA, that took place on August 9, 1974—on September 8 gave a full pardon to President Nixon for any crimes he may have committed against the USA—because of his involvement with the Watergate Scandal. Nevertheless, this is something that President Ford believed to be in an agreement, with own set of Christian beliefs. Well, having said this, one of the bravest Americans we could remember on this day was a **black woman named Vivian Malone**, who was the first African-American ever enrolled as a freshman into the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa on June 11, 1963. It was an extremely courageous thing for Vivian Malone to do on that day...with the help of Federal Troops who ensured her entrance into the University of Alabama, even though the doorway to the registration line was being **personally blocked by Governor George Wallace**, at that time, who was **still holding out for the segregation of the University of Alabama** at that time—who lost the battle that day—so that Miss Malone became the first **African-American** to graduate from the University of Alabama in 1968.

Vivian wasn't the only newcomer that day! There was also a **young African-American** man named **James Hood** who stood at her side and needed her encouragement! Therefore, she slipped into his hand a piece of paper upon which she had written a prayer for the both of them that went like this: **"Dear Heavenly Father, whatever may be our adversity this day, help us to face it with courage, for it can be conquered when you are with us. In faith, we pray in the name of Jesus! Amen!"**

Years later, after an assassination attempt had been made on Governor Wallace's life in 1972, and years later, after he had come to experience a deep change of heart, the former Governor George Wallace was rolled in his wheelchair into the **Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery** one Sunday morning to meet with **Vivian Malone personally and to ask her for her forgiveness** and indicating to everyone present **how deeply sorry he was for the way he had treated her, seeking her forgiveness face to face**, indicating also that on that day—he wanted to make amends with her before died.

At their meeting in the Baptist Church in Montgomery that Sunday, Vivian told Governor Wallace that she had forgiven him many years before this, and when she was questioned about that again by news reporters in 2003, as to why she had forgiven him, she replied: **“This may sound weird to some people, but I’m a Christian and just as I grew up in the Church believing that no other person was better than me and that I certainly wasn’t better than anyone else also—but that we are all equal in the eyes of God, I was also taught that you forgive people no matter what and so this is what I did!”** What happened there that day was the actual carrying out of the command that our Crucified and Risen Savior still gives this same command of his to each of us—again this morning—when he says to us by his resurrection power: *“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you—leave your gift there before the altar—and go! First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift”* (Matthew 5:23-24)! AMEN