

**Liturgical Date/Readings:** Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany Year A- Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

**Date:** February 16, 2020

**Homilist:** The Rev. Alanna M. Van Antwerpen

**Community Context:** 8 a.m., 10 a.m. Christ Church-Episcopal, Exeter, NH

**Sources:** Working Preacher, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Virtue Ethics”, David Lose “In the Meantime...”, Marcus Aurelius

Recently I was listening to a podcast where the interviewee was talking about traffic and being stuck in an hour long back up. When he finally passed by the scene of the accident, there wasn’t much to look at as the first responders had everything under control. Relaying the story, he said, “Why is it that people need to slow down to look at an accident?! If there are emergency responders there to help already, why can’t people *govern* themselves so we can all keep moving forward. Our gawking isn’t helping.... please, Just Govern yourself!”

***“Just Govern Yourself!”***

That phrase struck a chord with me. It’s not frequently that we talk about self-governance. Maybe being good or polite, but not seeing ourselves in need of attentive self-control. This is a virtue ethical approach to life which holds up discipline as the ability to regulate our emotional, psychological and physical reactions to others.<sup>1</sup> Self-governance is the ability to exercise an ethic based on a deep sense that acting virtuously is a reward or good, in and of itself. For example, this is different than what is called deontology which focuses on the power of duty or following the rules. It is also different than an ethic of consequentialism that emphasizes the consequences or outcome of a decision as a guiding principle of action...I love this stuff; can you tell I was a Philosophy Major?!

This sense of cultivating a virtue ethic is present in our liturgy readings today. As followers of Christ, our opening collect reminds us that the origin of our virtue comes from God. Spiritually, the Collect, gathers us up like a bouquet as we begin our worship. In that moment God holds us in our need of whatever we’ve come here to find—solace, clarity, inspiration or nourishment for the journey then sets us on a path of worship together. Today, our collect acknowledges the trust we place in God, asking God to, “Mercifully accept our prayers and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed.”

In our reading from Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people that the commandments of God make a pathway to life saying, “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” This is done by loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him. In a world as fast-paced as ours, it is hard to remember to slow down enough to reflect on how loving, listening and holding fast to God can inform our choices in relationships, our work life or in our larger communities.

Yet this is foundational to our Christian identity because we can sometimes forget that God is with us. We can sometimes get focused on what Paul calls being “still of the flesh” when we get caught up in jealousy and quarreling. We can lose sight of how God is asking us to govern ourselves in order to preserve human dignity, integrity and love.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Virtue Ethics”

So, it is with our Gospel reading, where Jesus' teaching implores listeners not to focus on just the consequences of keeping the rules, but getting at the root cause of disharmony by addressing the breakdown in relationship. Jesus affirms that the law is not there to be followed for its own sake, but to transform those who follow it to the higher purpose of maintaining integrity in relationship with themselves and others. Jesus reminds us to govern ourselves with a sense of virtue ethics. In this passage Jesus gets at the root cause of Murder, adultery, divorce and swearing oaths promising more than your word. He speaks about how these actions of outward disharmony **begin with** internal disharmony. It is when we let anger, false judgment, lust, flagrant disregard for another's wellbeing or lying rule us that we get into trouble. The outward action is the manifestation of an inward disunity, losing focus on governing ourselves.

But instead of being remote, abstract rules, Jesus turns these things into what the biblical scholar David Lose calls, "intensely relational responses that broaden the meaning of the law" Lose talks about this by saying for Jesus, "*It's not enough just to refrain from murder. We should also treat each other with respect and that means not speaking hateful word.*

*It is not enough to avoid physically committing adultery. We should also not objectify other persons by seeing them as a means to satisfy our physical desires by lusting after them.*

*It is not enough to follow the letter of the law regarding divorce. We should not treat people as disposable and should make sure that the most vulnerable—in this culture that was often women and children—are provided for.*

*It is not enough to keep ourselves from swearing falsely or lying to others. We should speak and act truthfully in all of our dealings so that we don't need to make oaths at all."*<sup>2</sup>

In this way, Jesus touches on what Marcus Aurelius said that, "The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts: therefore, guard accordingly, and take care that you entertain no notions unsuitable to virtue and reasonable nature." I remember my mother saying, first it exists here (point to brain), then here (point to mouth), then it moves here (point to hands.) She was telling us that when we notice a thought or feeling like anger, jealousy, hate or any number of things, that it was the seedbed for committing the act. I realize now, that she was talking about living a virtue ethic through 'governing ourselves.'

This doesn't mean that we need to be flawless, it doesn't mean that we don't fall short or that God requires perfection. I, for one, know that I fall short. I have also witnessed that divorce is actually a way for a couple to choose life because marriages are not made in heaven, but here on earth. Of course, we all fall short sometimes, because we are human. Yet, it is when we are able to keep the integrity of the relationship at the center that we live into the virtue of Christ.

The Good News of our Gospel is that we can do this work with God's help. Within the scope of our family, work and church communities we have a real opportunity to live into the transforming power of our relationship in Christ. So today, let us re-commit ourselves seeking and serving God in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves as we strive to "Govern ourselves in the Light of Christ."

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<sup>2</sup> [www.davidlose.net](http://www.davidlose.net)