

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Feb 16th 2014

“...until all is accomplished.”

The 5th chapter of Matthew begins with the Beatitudes. As a child, I called them ‘the blessed bees’. A lot of them and difficult to understand. Mostly I understood that if I were poor, meek, mournful, pure, merciful and persecuted, God would love me more. Then comes specific directives about living a righteous life: reminders of the original commandments “You shall not...”, a call to reconciliation, cautions about what may happen if things end up before a judge. The chapter is a cautionary tale.

Jesus makes a startling statement, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” Many of Jesus’ followers thought that was his mission – to abolish the law as prescribed by tradition and the Pharisees. Out with the old and in with the new.

Not sure why, but recently I sat in on a criminal trial. The defendant was accused of an egregious offense. One that spontaneously arouses fear and anger. As a spectator I sat in the gallery along with an in-and-out newspaper reporter and an occasional casual observer and the accused’s family: spouse, siblings, parents, in-laws. They appeared supportive, fearful and overwhelmed. They hung on every word. There had been no reconciliation and things were before a judge.

During court recess, I spoke with the family. They confided in me. They were listening to testimony they could not relate to their loved one. They were bound together by their conviction that their family member was innocent and by their staunch faith in God. They trusted the law, the legal system. Above all they trusted God would take care of them.

It was not easy being there. The atmosphere felt heavy and condemning. The law says I am innocent until proven guilty. Not with this allegation. The accused was guilty until proven innocent. This time burden of proof lay with the defense. My role was to sit quietly, watch and not interrupt. I heard witnesses contradict themselves and others regarding the same event. In the closing arguments I sat in disbelief as finger-pointing prosecutors bellowed accusations. It was heart wrenching.

At times the judge seemed preoccupied with paper work. One member of the jury appeared more interested in his watch than in the proceedings. Body language, although not an exact science, can be telling: pursed lips, tightly folded arms, clinched jaws, focused attention, wandering eyes, fidgeting fingers, relaxed dispositions.

Who knows what goes on in another's mind and heart. After more than a week's worth of testimony the jury came to a verdict: guilty. Maybe a rightful verdict, maybe not. A decision beyond any reasonable doubt? A verdict that would terminate a career, ruin his respected standing in the community, and cause untold hardship and heartbreak in a marriage and family. Misery for many.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”

“Until all is accomplished.” All? In this gospel, possibly Jesus is talking not just about the letter of the law but also about the Beatitudes and how they are meant to co-exist. God does not call me or anyone to a life of misery, torment or suffering, but if it occurs I am called to anoint the other, to anoint the situation with mercy and comfort. “...until Heaven and earth pass away...”, the law and the Beatitudes will not pass away. Jesus directs me to abide by the law, and to live out the beatitudes.

The time in that courtroom was heart wrenching.

I continue to carry the misery of it in my heart. I am left with questions, prayers, suppose-ings, musings, and imaginings. Maybe this is a invitation to pre-Lenten meditations: mercy and comfort. Who, when, and how am I invited to bless with Mercy and Comfort? What would that be like in my world, in my life?

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath.

It is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

The Merchant of Venice

Shakespeare

Joan Blandin Howard - Creighton University Student