

ADULTERY AND OTHER BAD THINGS IN THE HEART
(Matthew 5:21-30)

You can't get through law school without taking a course in criminal law, even if you don't ever intend to practice criminal law. So like everyone else, I took the class and hoped I would remember enough to answer a criminal law question if one showed up on the bar exam.

All that was a long time ago and I have forgotten just about everything I learned in law school – about criminal law and a lot of other subjects. But I do remember one thing: you don't have a crime without a guilty mind, but bad thoughts alone aren't against the law. The traditional rule was "the act does not make a person guilty unless the mind is also guilty." In other words, it takes both – an overt act and a guilty mind

And thank goodness for that. In George Orwell's scary novel *Nineteen Eighty-four* there are secret Thought Police whose job is to arrest and punish anyone who has an unapproved thought. Thank God we haven't quite descended to that Orwellian nightmare – at least not fully and not yet.

But did you notice exactly what Jesus said? Here's Eugene Peterson's helpful translation: *Anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother 'idiot!' and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell 'stupid!' at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire.*

If that's the standard, then I daresay most of us are in big trouble. I know I am.

And then there's what Jesus had to say about lust and adultery, which I shamelessly included in the sermon title hoping it might pique your curiosity..

Some of us are old enough to remember the 1976 presidential campaign when Jimmy Carter was running against Gerald Ford. Carter had a big early lead in the polls, until he agreed to do an interview with *Playboy* magazine. Toward the end the interviewer asked about his faith, and Carter said, "I'm just human and I'm tempted and Christ set some almost impossible standards for us. The Bible says, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.' Christ said, 'I tell you that anyone who looks on a woman with lust in his heart has already committed adultery.' I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times."

That was Jimmy Carter's big confession. And when the interview was published a month before the election it stirred up a hornet's nest and almost cost Carter the White House. Nobody seemed to care about the context or pay attention to his qualifiers about being human and being tempted and about God recognizing and forgiving our shortcomings. Lust and adultery were all anyone cared about. They got all the attention.

Jimmy Carter is a pretty astute theologian, but he was also pretty naïve because he thought the interview was over and the recorder turned off when he made those comments. *Playboy* had agreed to submit the final text to the Carter

campaign so they could review it for accuracy. But as you can imagine, but they weren't about to give Carter's campaign the chance to edit out anything this hot.

Today's reading begins a section of the Sermon on the Mount that scholars call six "antitheses," little discourses that take the general form "You have heard it said..., but I say to you..." The two antitheses this morning begin by quoting from the Ten Commandments: "You shall not murder," "You shall not commit adultery." And then in both cases Jesus ups the ante and goes beyond the letter of the law to intensify or radicalize the commandment – to condemn the kind of guilty mind that leads to guilty acts.

Since adultery's in the title of this sermon, let me say a bit about adultery as the Bible understands it.

When the Commandment says "You shall not commit adultery," what it's referring to is a married woman having sex with a man other than her husband. Adultery was considered a property crime – a crime against the husband, who had exclusive rights to his wife. A wife was essentially the husband's property. On the other hand, a married man who had sex with an unmarried woman was not guilty of adultery. It was all very patriarchal and reflected the low status of women in biblical times.

Jesus takes that patriarchal system for granted. Notice he doesn't say anything about women lusting, just men. But don't you ladies think you're off the hook because the Bible talks about other kinds of sexual misconduct even if Jesus doesn't.

What makes Jesus' statement different is that he doesn't only speak about someone else's wife, but about "a woman" in general. And this probably reflects the new reality of the early Christian community, which didn't regard women as seductresses to be avoided but as sisters to be welcomed. In a patriarchal society, women are under the control of a man – a father, a brother, or a husband. And any woman out and about in society on her own is looked at as a temptress at best or a prostitute at worst. But the early church attracted a lot of women who didn't come with a man attached – widows and married women who joined without their husbands.

So Jesus' new, stricter, more radical interpretation of the law really has the effect of elevating the status of women, recognizing them as persons in their own right and not merely as appendages of some male relative or as sex objects.

In 1981 Pope John Paul II took this a step further and said a man could commit adultery in Jesus' sense with his own wife if he treated her as a sex object.

Adultery might get our attention. After all, as Madison Avenue well knows, sex sells. But Jesus actually quotes two of the Ten Commandments in today's lesson, including the one about murder. And as I said, in both cases he goes beyond the strict letter of the law.

It's sometimes been said that Jesus relocates ethics "in the heart" as opposed to "Jewish legalism" that was only concerned with external acts. That's historically inaccurate and, worse, it's a slander on Judaism. Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, contemporary of Jesus, wrote, "The one who hates his neighbor belongs to those who shed blood." The rabbis knew exactly what Jesus was

getting at, and they agreed with him. In a non-Jewish context, Aristotle wrote, "What is a crime for a person to do is a crime for a person to think."

So Jesus is hardly unique in teaching that the thought is parent to the deed and in calling his disciples to a higher form of righteousness – one that reflects the unqualified, absolute will of God. I'll be saying more about that in two weeks when we deal with another passage where Jesus says we have to be perfect as God is perfect.

But we're not God, as Jimmy Carter rightly noted. We're human and we're tempted, and sometimes we give in to temptation. So how are imperfect people supposed to live in this imperfect world?

It's pretty clear we can't take what Jesus says literally. If the remedy for sin is tearing out eyes and cutting off hands, we're going to be left with an awful lot of blind, maimed Christians. That can't be what Jesus intends.

We certainly ought to aspire to the perfect standard Jesus lifts up. Just striving for the higher righteousness Jesus calls us to will probably make us better, happier people. But ethics, even Christian ethics, in the final analysis isn't for angels who don't need ethical rules, but for imperfect, fallible human beings.

The apostle Paul was acutely aware of the tension between Jesus' counsel of perfection and what's humanly possible. In his letter to the Romans he admits that he can will what is right but can't actually do it; he wants to do good but winds up doing evil instead (Rom 7:18,19). And in the letter to the Ephesians he says "be angry, but do not sin" (Eph 4:26). It's not the angry state of mind that he condemns but the acts that flow from it.

In the end, we have to come back to what Jimmy Carter said. We are human, we are tempted, we sometimes give in to that temptation. But God loves us and forgives us anyway. A good way to sum it up may be to borrow an idea from a prayer by Thomas Merton: we believe and trust that the desire to please God does in fact please God. That is our best hope as we struggle to be the kinds of people Jesus calls us to be.