

## God's Meddling Ways

There are many things about our human nature which does not seem to change; an aspect that is fairly consistent in all the records we have about human behavior. One of the most obvious is that we really don't like being told what to do. We have a strong preference for being in control. This is especially true in the modern culture around us where we are proud of our independence and freedom to determine our own behaviors. The passages read just now in some ways are about that preference...and the consequences of some of the choices we make in our lives. The first passage from Deuteronomy was recorded as one of the final addresses which Moses makes to those folks he had led in the wilderness. The journey was not smooth as they often challenged the guidance they were given. This text begins: "See I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess." We all know how well that went. Most of the remainder of the Hebrew Scriptures is a record of how the people chose not to follow the guidance given to them by God at Sinai. The ways that Moses is referring to are those of the Ten Commandments and others which were designed so that all the people could live together in community and prosper. The ways of God which are detailed are meant to benefit those who follow them. As the final verse in this passage states: "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors." It seems that we often think of the Commandments as being burdensome, heavy obligations and weights that interfere in the way we wish to live. On the other hand, Deuteronomy portrays the commandments as life-giving, liberating, restorative, and redemptive. According to the Hebrew Scriptures, the commandments are an amazing gift that makes it possible for us to live in harmony with God's will—with God's justice and peace and mercy and love. We are not used to talking about the commandments this way. We're much more familiar with view them as restrictions placed upon us that interfere with life. But that misunderstands the role of the Torah in the covenant God made with the people of Israel. When God entered the covenant with the Jewish people, it was to form a relationship. Not surprisingly, what God was looking for from the covenant people was to commit themselves to this relationship wholeheartedly. In that context, the purpose of the commandments was to define human life as an expression of what it means to love God. The commandments were given as the parameters within which they could live their lives—parameters that were intended to enable them to enjoy a life that is full of living hope, lasting joy, and genuine love, both toward God and others. Viewing the commandments as burdens misses the fact that they begin with the "good news of what the liberating God has done—he had brought them out of the land of Egypt—out of the house of slavery into freedom. The commandments then describe the shape of the freedom they have been given. This freedom is not the one we envision for ourselves, because we want no restrictions. We often use the words of Paul who said that Jesus set us free from the Law. Yet as we just found within the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that he did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. Our gospel lesson for today is an example of God's desire to meddle in our lives. In it

Jesus is spelling out in very specific terms what it looks like to do God's will on earth as it is in heaven. For him it means that we not only don't kill one another, we also avoid hatred, anger and disrespect. For him doing God's will on earth as it is in heaven means that we not only don't engage in promiscuity, we also relate to others with pure hearts. For him, doing God's will on earth as it is in heaven means that we not only love our friends, we are called to love our enemies. This seems like radical meddling indeed. Say the word "radical" to the average person and the name of Jesus is likely not the first image that comes to mind. If you think about "radical acts", the Sermon on the Mount is unlikely to be on the list. We like to think of the Sermon on the Mount as gentle and soothing. The Beatitudes are so lovely. Jesus' teaching of what we now call "The Lord's Prayer" is likewise lyrical as is the passage that follows the prayer about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. This just does not strike us as all that radical. Radical means violence and sit-ins. Yet the root of the word radical is a Latin word *radix*, which means root. The word *radix* lives on in mathematics to refer to the base number in some larger system of numbers and numeration. The *radix* is what is at the bottom of something, at the foundation or even below the foundation—at the roots. The *radix* gets at the root, at the origin of something. And so there is a sense in which a radical is someone who gets to the bottom—the root of something and wants to return something—a political system, a religious belief system—to what it was intended to be in the beginning, at the root of all things. In this lectionary reading from Matthew 5, Jesus is indeed a radical after all because what he is doing with God's Law here is radicalizing it. He is getting everyone's attention back to the basics and the root origin of God's commands. Jesus wants us to go deeper to see what has been holding this whole thing up from the beginning so that we can understand things afresh. From the outside looking in, from our point of view, it looks like Jesus is meddling; like he is making the Law of God ridiculously hard to keep. He's turning the Law into something different, something harder and more difficult. But is he really? Is what Jesus is saying really something new and different? No, he is radicalizing it, he is bringing it back to the roots of why God gave the Law in the first place. Of course, the external behavior and actual deeds are always worse, always more injurious to others than secret fantasies. And only a very careless person would conclude that if an adulterous fantasy gets you in as much trouble as the actual affair then you may as well have the affair while you are at it. That is, to state the merely obvious, and not exactly Jesus' point here. So what is the point? The point is that the Law of God was meant to foster human flourishing at every level, including at the deepest levels of our hearts and minds. God wants us to respect each other, to love each other, to see God's own image residing deep within one another. Human life is not supposed to be some giant game in which you scheme and scam to get ahead for the good of old #1. We are not to use people as pawns, as objects of our lust, as receptacles for our scorn, as targets for our desires to brutalize, manipulate, and then discard. And it's not enough that all of this does not show up on the outside in our behavior. Hypocrisy is everything it's cracked up to be and sooner or later it has a way of damaging the hypocrite, too. In Dante's *The Inferno* the clever punishment for hypocrites was that they were clothed with elaborate and resplendent golden garments, but the garments were lined with lead. To wear this attire every day literally weighed the person down with weariness and an unending sense of burdensome heaviness. And that is what unremitting anger and lust and deception does to us on the inside: it weighs us down, saps our joy, and sooner or later really will show up on the outside in how we treat others, talk to them,

regard them. The root origin of God's Law is not really all about self-improvement, but also about other people and about God himself. How do we see others? How do we treat them in our heart of hearts? Look, by getting back to the radix of the Law, Jesus really does nail every one of us and there is a sense that the larger function of Jesus' teachings on the Law does cast us back to a reliance on the grace of God alone—He says "your righteousness should exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees." But here Jesus is not just being tough on us: he is at the end of the day reminding us of a truth that is actually so very encouraging: God created us to flourish in his good creation. God wants all of us to flourish. If it is difficult to be reminded how routinely we undercut the flourishing of our neighbors and of ourselves, it is nevertheless glorious to know that the God who created us and the whole cosmos is on our side and really does desire to see all things and all manner of things going well in his creation. When we find the meddling of God's guidance a restriction on our freedoms, we might think of something said by St. Augustine: "love, and do what you will." In this he was saying that if we truly love God and truly love others, then we are free to do whatever we want, because what we want will be an expression of love toward God and others! When we make the choice to align ourselves with the fulfillment of God's justice and peace in this world, then there's not much in the Ten Commandments—or even in Jesus' teachings about them—that will be limiting or restricting to us. God's meddling ways are indeed for our welfare so that we may truly have the life abundant. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.