

# The Lessons Appointed for Use on the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany



Year A  
RCL

Deuteronomy 30:15-20  
Matthew 5:21-37  
Psalm 119:1-8

## The Collect

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: 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; through Jesus Christ our

Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the  
Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Moses said, “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. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and pos-

sess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. 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, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”

**Matthew 5:21-37**

Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your

accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into

hell.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your

word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."



## SERMON

I present to you – the lesson of the rubber band. Notice how relaxed and free of care the rubber band is. I can hold it in my palm and it is not troubled. I can dangle it, and it is not anxious. I can leave it on the pulpit and it will not mourn my absence nor celebrate my return. The rubber band lives the life of acceptance and contentment most of us dream of, a life-long untroubled vacation, free of worries. If the temperature is moderate, and the sun shines, the rubber band is content. If the storm unleashes its fury upon the world, and people suffer, still the rubber band is content. It is untouched by either compassion or cares for it gives no thought to the day or the morrow. In its natural

state, the rubber band is relaxed, comfortable – and utterly without purpose for it is inert.

For the rubber band to become useful it must come into tension. Under tension, that which once made no contribution becomes a contributor. Once under tension, once drawn from its natural state, that which was inert becomes involved in struggle between its desire to return to its original, relaxed and comfortable state and the forces which hold it in tension.

As I look out at you, I think I see you pretty much as you see yourselves — really OK people. Responsible people. People who have worked hard to support and raise families. People who give generously to the causes that come up locally. (*Soto*

*voce* Plus, I don't remember any of your faces from any of my docket sheets, and that's generally a real good sign.) The question I'd raise is this: are all these positive qualities you exemplify the same as being a good Christian? And if they are, what is the point in proclaiming yourself as a disciple of Christ on top of all the good you do? Why in the world would you want to engage a higher Power if that Power seeks to put you under tension? Plainly put, should not the church be satisfied with supporting and encouraging those very positive qualities you have reflected in your lives?

Well ... no. Such a thing, surprise to say, is a monstrous heresy!

Years ago Presbyterian sociologist of religion

Dean Hoge<sup>1</sup> wrote this about American Christianity:

**“For the typical Protestant church member middle class commitments to family, career, and standard of living are so strong that the church commitment is largely instrumental to them and contingent on whether the church appears to serve them. As a result, many local churches tend to become instruments for achieving middle class interests, whether or not these interests can be defended in New Testament terms.”**

If the church truly existed to serve middle class commitments to family, career and standard of living, then the answer to our question, “What is the point in proclaiming yourself as a disciple of Christ?” is, “There is no point to it.” Your belief

1 Catholic University of America, d. 2008

might be in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but your faith is not. Your faith is in the maintenance of family, career and standard of living.

There is nothing inherently wrong about maintenance of family, career and standard of living unless it replaces God's claim upon you. Once it does, once you begin to see the church's role as protecting middle-class American interests, you have placed the cart squarely before the horse. The God who is revealed in the cross of Jesus challenges any attempt to draft God into the service of human cultures, achievements, or possessions.

Here is the heresy I'm talking about most clearly and prophetically stated by Karl Barth himself:

**When the gospel is offered to man, and he stretches out his hand to receive it and takes it into his hand, an acute danger arises which is greater than the danger that he may not understand it and angrily reject it. The danger is that he may accept it peacefully and at once make himself its lord and possessor, thus rendering it innocuous, making that which chooses him something which he himself has chosen, which therefore comes to stand as such alongside all the other things that he can also choose, and therefore control. ... Wherever the gospel is proclaimed...it is exposed at once to the danger of respectability.<sup>2</sup>**

“The danger is that he may accept it at once and make himself its lord and possessor, thus rendering it innocuous ... ” You do not choose God; God chooses you. Karl Barth, who died in 1968, was

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 141

the major author of the Barmen Declaration that appears in our Book of Confessions. The Barmen Declaration is a statement of the Confessing Church opposing the Nazi-supported “German Christians” movement known for its antisemitism and extreme nationalism. The “German Christians” looked to the church to support and bless their anti-semitism and nationalism in the same way we often look to the church to bless our middle-class American lives. The Confessing Church, founded by Bonhoeffer and Barth and others rejected any such idea, and their founding document is still a part of the Presbyterian Book of Confessions!

When you embrace the idea that God called you, and abandon the idea that the exercise of your “free

will” got you “saved” you will be under tension. That tension will make you useful to God, for however comfortable it may be to remain in your natural state of repose, to become useful you must come into tension. You must live in the world and recognize its relentless pull so that you can know it for what it is — that which draws us away from God’s call. Once under tension, that which was inert becomes involved in struggle between its desire to return to its original, relaxed and comfortable state and the forces which hold it in tension.

Moses said to all Israel the words which the Lord commanded him, “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. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

“Life and prosperity, death and adversity.” God seeks to stretch you out so that you may live. Your humanity wants to find a less stressful compromise. These two forces form the tension within you. The bad news is that this is going to make you uncomfortable. The good news is that God knows that you don’t have it in you to live up to His Commandments all by yourself and are going to need

some help to keep this tension always present. For this reason, we prayed from Psalms today:

<sup>4</sup> You laid down your commandments,  
that we should fully keep them.  
<sup>5</sup> Oh, that my ways were made so direct  
that I might keep your statutes!  
<sup>6</sup> Then I should not be put to shame,  
when I regard all your commandments.  
<sup>7</sup> I will thank you with an unfeigned heart,  
when I have learned your righteous judgments.  
<sup>8</sup> I will keep your statutes;  
do not utterly forsake me.

You are only useful to God if you are under tension for unless you hear and attend to the word of God, you're going to just lie there being inertly human. This is the critical, central issue. Unless you turn your back on your self-satisfaction and attend to and acknowledge the influence of God seeking to stretch you, you will accomplish nothing. The truth is, we are so anxious to be left alone in our self-satisfaction and our natural state that we reject,

very often without thinking about it, God's claim upon us. We simply will not face up to the wrongs in which we involve ourselves. The tension I am urging upon you should be between our own sinful natural state – and our satisfaction with it – and the commandments of God, for unless we do that, we are of no more use to God than that rubber band.

**Christianity simply does not make sense until you have faced the sort of facts I have been describing. Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness. It therefore has nothing (as far as I know) to say to people who do not know they have done anything to repent of and who do not feel that they need any forgiveness. It is after you have realized that there is a real Moral Law, and a Power behind the law, and that you have broken that law and put yourself wrong**

**with that Power—it is after all this, and not a moment sooner, that Christianity begins to talk.<sup>3</sup>**

When Jesus teaches about ripping out your eyeballs and cutting off your hands, when he equates anger with murder and the rest of it, he isn't urging self-mutilation or self-hatred. He is showing you the proper standards of tension you must sustain to be a disciple of Christ.

The point of all this is simply this: does your understanding of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth called the Christ put you in proper tension? Does it make you unsatisfied with your compromises? Does it demand of you repentance and make you thirst for forgiveness?

AMEN

<sup>3</sup> *Mere Christianity* Copyright © 1952 C.S. Lewis Pte. Ltd. Copyright renewed © 1980 C.S. Lewis Pte. Ltd. Page 31



## BENEDICTION

We live in the strangest of times, a time when leaders refuse to ever admit the need for repentance, a time when those in power use that power to harm those who have spoken against them. It is a difficult time to be a mature Christian.

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

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Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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