

**Sermon: 2020/02/16 (6th Sunday after Epiphany) - Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; & Matthew 5:21-37\_BTR**

[Invite children to the front. Step-ladder and binoculars.]

Moses was old.

He had led the people of Israel - the Hebrews or, "Jews" - for many, many years; out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and *all* the way to the borders of the "Promised Land," called Canaan.

And he was dying, but he wanted to make one, *last* speech - to *inspire* the people; to *warn* the people.

So, he climbed a *tall* mountain called Nebo, from which he could see the country that God was giving them.

[Climb step-ladder.]

And he took a *looong(!)* look.

[Look through binoculars.]

It seemed *wonderful*.

Small, fortified cities with busy markets.

Clean, blue rivers.

Sheep, camels and cows on rolling, green hills, grazing peacefully.

Everyone eating lots of yummy hummus, drinking wine...

And he said - essentially (I'm paraphrasing a little), "*Wow! That's the good life, that is.*"

But to enjoy it - to enjoy the "creature comforts" that God has created for us, we must follow His rules and directives - the "Commandments."

*But*, he continued, *if 'bow down to other gods and serve them'*; which is to say, *if you make up your own rules, you will ruin Canaan;*

*you will "ruin" the one opportunity of being alive in the Lord's creation;*

*and make it ugly and chaotic for yourself (and others).*

So, as far as you are able, *obey Him.*

Let's pray:

Lord God, help us be obedient to your plan and wishes; help us to see McMinnville as our Canaan. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Dismiss children.]

Fame - standing *out* from the crowd; *above* the herd, is a suspect thing.

I saw recently the trailer for the director Clint Eastwood's latest project, *The Ballad of Richard Jewell*, based on the life of the formerly obscure security guard Richard Jewell, who was wrongly suspected in the 1996 Olympic bombing in Atlanta, Georgia.

Jewell, it seems, risked his "life and limb" in a situation when *many* of us would, instinctively, would have run away:

during a routine patrol, he discovered, *terrifyingly(!)*, an abandoned backpack containing no less than *three* pipe-bombs, and, despite not knowing whatsoever if they were about to explode or not - there was *no* obvious count-down timer, unlike in the movies - he hung around;

he hung around *near* to the device, within sight of it; within its potentially very lethal blast-radius, so as to evacuate spectators, directing them to safety, saving lots of strangers from injury or worse.

Now, he was, initially, treated by the media as the hero he was, but, *quickly*, the coverage; the commentary turned on him, *savagely*:

he did, after all, fit the usual (F. B. I.) profile for a violent sociopath - until 9/11, that is.

He was white, male, a bachelor, and in his early "thirties".<sup>[n.1]</sup>

In other words, he was *exactly* like the Savior, Jesus.

So, is it just jealousy?

Basic and biological?

In gorilla troops, for example, the largest male - the "silver-back" - chases off younger rivals.

And, similarly, can we, "the nobodies," just not stand someone "shining out;" being exceptional?

Do we *loathe* celebrity as much as we envy it?

Is that why we love to see people fall from "pedestals"? -

Politicians; pop-stars, etcetera?

Fame is a suspect thing.

Which is why Jesus was constantly being harangued by the Pharisees during the northern period of His ministry;

by sceptics and cynics who waited - *and wanted* - to see Him "trip up;"

to make moral or intellectual mistakes (that they could ridicule Him for and discredit Him).

Thus, *always* when the crowd gathered - as it did for the "Sermon on the Mount,"

which we're still hearing from in our gospel readings at the moment - there would appear too this outer "fringe" of "hawks," looking to pounce on anything they could use to "puncture" the Galilean public's enthusiasm for the man. So, regarding Jesus as a social-nuisance, a trouble-maker, they were surprised - as perhaps we are today, to hear Him say that He came *not* to abolish the precious Law - very ancient, exotic and out-of-date - *but to fulfil it*.

Then, this morning, we hear Jesus double-down on the claim: "Yes, that's right," He says, effectively, "just listen to this..." - and what follows, as you can see on your Scripture insert, is Jesus not relaxing the Old Testament expectations *but making them (even) more rigorous*. "You have heard it said...but I say to you." - Again and again, Jesus makes the Law *more exacting; more demanding; more stringent*.

How, then, is this "Good News" for you and me, then? Well, *if nothing else*, what Jesus does is to highlight the *extreme*, unapproachable holiness of God. He was arguing, you see, if only implicitly, that the Law as handed down from Moses wasn't, in fact, the *precise* will of God; it didn't *precisely* reflect who the Creator is: it was a *pale, "diluted"* reflection only. And as Jesus exposed the reality of the gulf between humanity and Him, we come to understand how much more gracious God is to "reach" across that "gulf" the way He has in the Incarnation; in becoming...like us.

I once heard God's holiness described, analogically, as being like the sun. The sun - *our* sun, is, obviously, *absolutely* necessary for life to exist here on earth: we *need* its heat and light; its energy. But if we get too close, it would destroy us; *consume* us - *fry* us, *instantly*, to a "crisp." There is, then, *a tension* - What is *sooo(!)* good about the sun is *also* what makes it deadly. We can't get near it. But that's what God wants! He wants *intimacy* with us. And so, to make that possible, on the Cross, he *imputed* Christ's holiness - His successful "fulfilment" of the Law, to those who claim it by prayers of confession their *need* of it. This was Martin Luther's *key* insight - an insight clearly present in the Scriptures but once overlooked.

And it is his feast-day this (coming) Tuesday, so it is appropriate to mention this about him - that devoted scholar of the Bible to whom we owe a great debt. Ruminating on *Romans*, chapter 4, Luther noticed that Saint Paul says Abraham was 'counted' as righteous.

Not that he was, in fact, righteous.

Just that God has *chosen* to see him as such.

And this same gift is extended to you and me.

I quote: 'He has made His righteousness my righteousness, ...then I am righteous now with the same righteousness as He. My sin cannot devour Him, but it is engulfed in the unfathomable depths of His righteousness for He himself is God, who is blessed forever.' [n.2]

Amen?

#### Footnotes:

1. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard\\_Jewell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Jewell)
2. As quoted in: Bird, Michael F. (June 2004), 'Incorporated Righteousness: A Response to Recent Evangelical Discussion Concerning the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness in Justification', *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 47, No. 2, pp. 252-275, 254.