

Epiphany VII Year A

“For God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

When I was in college one of my favorite movies was *Annie Hall*, one of Woody Allen’s best I think....my friends and I, who had practically memorized the dialogue, for months would recite the lines to each other... some of ya’ll remember those days (I had a friend in seminary who could recite the entirety of Pee Wee Herman’s Big Adventure, but that’s another story)....There was one, among many great scenes, one scene early on in the movie....The protagonist at this point was about eleven years old (the protagonist being a kid with thick glasses who looks and acts a lot like Woody Allen) and he lives with his parents directly under the roller coaster at Coney Island...The family is having a meal and the roller coaster cars rumble and roar overhead shaking the dishes on the table and causing the pictures on the wall to lean askew....It was pretty absurd; a family living under a roller coaster....in any case it was hilarious, at least to me....In the scene, during the family meal the mother and father (with the miniature Woody Allen character listening in) are having an argument about their cleaning woman whom the mother has discovered has been stealing....Now this is my paraphrase of the conversation: The mother says, Albe, you’ve got to fire her she’s stealing....Albe says, well so what? how much could she steal? (Gladys) But she’s stealing!’ (Albe) but she’s poor!.... (Gladys) but she’s stealing!!....(Albe) well, if she can’t steal from us who can she steal from?”

Here in a movie made some thirty five years ago is a classic example of Jewish Rabbinical discourse...polemical argument....On the one hand... the letter of the law....and on the other the spirit of the law....On the one hand, the letter of the law:...she’s stealing and therefore must pay...and on the other....the spirit of the law: yes, stealing is wrong but in this case we can afford leniency, generosity....after all she is poor and we know she wouldn’t be stealing if she didn’t have to....and maybe the law intends punishment when there is malice? Maybe?

It is the very same argument that is going on in this section of Matthew’s gospel....Jesus arguing with the scribes and Pharisees, they who know and know how to enforce the letter of the law...you know, the same ones who accuse Jesus of healing on the Sabbath...and Jesus is arguing for the spirit of the law....that the written laws themselves only scratch the surface of how we are to live together....that there is always a deeper reality

to our common life...that the law must continually be interpreted and reinterpreted in light of new knowledge, new circumstances.

You lawyers know this argument well in jurisprudence, among candidates and appointees to the higher courts....those who want to cling to the letter of the law as it was originally intended (as if that were possible)... and then those who would interpret the law in light of context and situation, new knowledge, new circumstances...new interpretation...the spirit of the law perhaps expanding or even radically altering the letter of the law.... that's Matthew's point here: that God through Moses gave us the letter of the law...but in light of the spirit with which it was given then it must be forever interpreted, if God's evolving vision of the created order is to come about....In other words, the creation is still evolving...and dare I say God evolving in it...and we made in God's image evolving within a creative unfolding of a universe still incomplete, immature....so our laws, our morals, our ethics must evolve as well...it is in short a grand process of perfection.

Jesus calls for us to be perfect as the father is perfect....I've always allowed that line to let me off the hook....who can be perfect as God is perfect? Well the word in the Greek literally means maturity... completion...and it is in the Aorist tense for you Koine Greek scholars which means it can apply to both present and future... the present unfolding....and in Matthew's case and I think he is being very intentional here....that the notion of salvation, the active living into God's Commonwealth is a process....a process that has implications now in the present...and that has implications for the future....Jesus is telling us to be about the process that God is about...Jesus is telling us to grow up, as God is growing up....the old letter of the law: eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth has given way to the spirit of the law which is at its heart, compassion.... compassion that orders the cosmos....compassion that gives only.

And Jesus gets specific...he's not talking about a belief system or right thinking...he's talking about a way of life....he says don't resist evil (the translation literally means don't use armed resistance to fight evil.... quite a difference from the way we usually hear it) And then love and pray for your enemies. Y'all this is an argument for non-violence pure and simple....In spite of, in the face of the warrant for warfare in Leviticus and Deuteronomy...Jesus in the spirit of the law, is altering the letter of the law... Gandhi said it well...if you fight with violence you fight with the enemy's best weapon....So let's put this passage in a little context here... this gospel was written post 70, which means post destruction of the Temple and the razing of Jerusalem by the Romans in which some three to four

thousand Jerusalemites were killed....all of which was brought on by a violent Jewish insurrection....this community, this Matthean community has learned...as the prophets have warned them over the ages, over their history...that violence does not work.... They have learned that violence begets violence...how long, O Lord, How long will it take us to learn.

Of course in our own age we have some evidence...evidence of the effectiveness of the non-violent resistance to evil...and when Jesus says don't resist evil he doesn't mean capitulate...he means fight evil, but without violence...fight evil with love....fight evil with diplomacy....with reason....with studied speech and action.... Fight evil with imagination, with creativity, with empathy...with honesty and forthrightness and truth....and violence is not the last resort...Love is still and always will be the last resort....We dear people of the way have seen it in our own day....the non-violent revolution in India...how non-violent protest ended apartheid in South Africa...how non-violent protest gave rights and dignity to our African American brothers and sisters....we are seeing it now in Egypt, passionate demands and protests that have brought down a government, and at least so far non-violent...enemies bringing out the best of the good, and evil can't stand against that....I think our prayers for the Middle East and for ourselves for that matter, must be a prayer for peaceful resistance to the wrong, violence our greatest enemy.... Naïve perhaps....but this gospel teaches us that the ways of indignity and greed and violence cannot stand against the ways of love and compassion and mercy....the ways of love that is for the just and the unjust alike....the evil and the good...we are told through the lips of Jesus that God loves us all...and them all!....not just us "nice" people, but even those of the extreme...I'm not sure I like that....But it is clear in this sermon on the mountain....That we are to love as God loves...sharing all that we have...standing with dignity with those who are shamed, slapped in the face...to stand with courage for all who are worn down by the roar and rumble of a world that would teach us violence as a means to accomplish the good....and we are to stand with our enemies as well...sorry, just war theorists...just war theory just ain't in here.

It is the Spirit of the law that we must forever seek, a higher love....a more radical love, and by radical I mean love at its roots...love that includes and embraces all...and there we will find God's gracious vision, a vision forever new and forever renewed for a world in the process of its completion... in the process of its maturity...and we are a part of the process in no small way...We have been told in this sermon that we are salt and light, necessary rudiments for this beautiful and arduous process....we are love in the flesh given for the world's sake....a higher love calling us....a

higher love....Jesus and the movement our touchstone....It is time for the people of faith, the people of love to seize the moral initiative...to live the way God lives, and that is living for everyone: brother, sister, neighbor, and enemy alike...for it will bring about the world's recreation no less....and that takes courage and that takes most of all maturity...so its high time for all of us, all of us people of the faith.... to grow up.