**St. David’s Episcopal Church**

Bean Blossom, Indiana

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

Sermon by the Rev. Kate Wilson

### Sirach 15:15-20 **Psalm 1**19:1-8 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 Matthew 5:21-37

**✠**

In just about 8 hours some of us will be hunkered down in front of a wall-sized TV with chicken wings or whatever delicious food you enjoy during this highly sacred annual experience.

Seriously. I drove past the Raiders Colosseum in Oakland every Sunday for two years on my way to St. James Episcopal Church in Fremont, California. Heading there for the first of two services, starting at 8 am, I was surprised each and every home game day with all the cars and campers and tailgates of assorted kinds I passed on my route. They were set up and decked out at 7:15! They had flags flying, the coal on their grills was already fired up, smoke rising like incense to the football gods. It was a mystical experience with tents, chairs arranged, face paint visible from the highway; coolers. Coolers everywhere. It looked to me like a religious crusade, or the grounds of a medieval tournament. It was breathtaking. It was fun. The Raider Nation could throw a party. It just can’t be the same as the **Las Vegas** Raiders. The heat alone would keep people in their air-conditioned cars and melt their coolers.

Please feel free to live your faith fully and richly by praying for the team of your hopes – the Philadelphia Eagles or the Kansas City Chiefs, during the Prayers of the People. It’s also ok just to watch the game for the commercials and wardrobe malfunctions.

Why? Because it’s fun. **And,** because you have free will to make decisions that will please you without jeopardizing your soul. You may have noticed, while Joan was reading Sirach, the scriptural reference to the your free will and freedom to choose.

If you choose, you can keep the commandments,
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.

The writer knows that God respects you. God has standards and knows you can choose to fly them high on your personal ethical flagpole. Or you can walk away and live by your will. I’m talking as if God is just a person and I don’t actually know what God is, but I do know that going off in self-will, making choices that are not life giving, doesn’t generally end well. Ask people who have found their way back to life-giving behavior. *The Fisher King*, *Shawshank Redemption,* and *Jerry McGuire* are just a few movies that lean into that message, moving our hearts, touching our souls. Despite our poor choices and mistakes, God’s default mode is to create us and re-create us and to support us as his beloveds. We need not earn God’s love, as it is God’s nature to love us. Jesus simply asks us to share that love with one another, loving our neighbors as ourselves. That is living on a spiritual path.

Being on a spiritual path isn’t for sissies, as those movies suggest. Our decisions can impact later generations just as our ancestors’ decisions, or society’s decisions, have impacted us or our neighbors. It all sounds easy enough, but just as Sirach looks at our choices, the psalmist recognizes how hard it can sometimes be:

1 Happy are they whose way is blameless, \*
who walk in the law of the Lord!

2 Happy are they who observe his decrees \*
and seek him with all their hearts!

3 Who never do any wrong, \*
but always walk in his ways.

4 You laid down your commandments, \*
that we **should** fully keep them.

5 Oh, if only my ways were made so direct \*
that I might keep your statutes!

That’s about it. When Jesus joined us as fully human yet fully divine, he knew what he was getting into with us mortals. He knew that people sometimes made poor decisions, bone-head choices. He knew that people sometimes made destructive decisions purposely, decisions that crushed other people and spit in the face of God. He knew he had his work cut out for him. Being on a spiritual path is not for sissies, and being on a path offering salvation is – monumental, divine sized.

As we turn to our Gospel today, the third installment of the continuing Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is getting into the very underpinnings of our choices. Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them, to enrich them, to bring them to new life for a new generation and a new era. Our passage this morning sets up a series of opposites, or antitheses. The law says this, but **I** add more. Jesus is moving from the law simply stated to a standard that is not built on blind obedience, but on having the right intent. The law says not to murder. But I say to nip it in the bud. When you rage in murderous anger, stop right there. Deal with the anger. Learn from the anger. Settle the anger through reconciliation. Come back to peace in your soul and peace in your relationships long before committing a final, unchangeable, deadly action. He doesn’t say don’t get angry. People get angry. Jesus was angry more than once. Let it be a warning. Respond in love, not hate, in peace, not rage. Take the time you need to get back to a God place before you act. It’s funny that modern psychiatrists and psychologists have produced books, videos, group sessions, conferences all aimed at handling anger in “a healthy way.” They have language now that Jesus didn’t need. He knew us. He raised the bar on our behavior long before Oprah changed lives through truth.

Someone recently paid for a full-page ad in the *New York Times* citing statements made about mass murderers after the fact. I should have downloaded it when I saw it but failed to do so. “He killed animals as a boy”. “He beat up his mother more than once.” “He was angry at Jews because he said they have all the money.” Sentences like that. Sentences ranging back to a mass murder in the 1960s. Sentences about every such murder since then. People knew danger when they saw it, but people didn’t act, didn’t address the anger. That’s Jesus’s point. We have a lot to learn about intentions, our own and those we see as warning signs from ourselves and others.

This passage is harsh. Some scholars believe that the idea of being condemned to eternal flames did not come from Jesus, but from Zoroastrian neighbors at the time of Matthew. Matthew appears to have been influenced by the teaching and put it into Jesus‘s mouth. If, like me, you’d say that hell is the destitution and aloneness caused by self-willed separation from God, that it can and does happen **during** life and beyond life, that would be hell enough. People in AA say something I love. Many meetings are in church basements. Members say the church above is for people who are afraid of hell, and the meetings below are for people who have been there and don’t want to go back. That eternal void of separation is the opposite of Jesus’s message of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation, of his accepting some of the most judged and rejected from society into his inner circle.

The passage is harsh and hyperbolic: gouge out your eye; cut off your hand. Not even two millennia deaden the shock of these words. Does it impress you with the message of how important it is to address at the earliest inkling?

Each of these antitheses deserves a round table conversation. How do they strike you? What is Jesus saying to you? Where is God’s love? It is harder to hear the good news in this passage; it challenges and makes you shudder. The Good News is God’s love made manifest in Jesus; it is Christ’s understanding and love of us mere humans. Sometimes, like a stubborn mule, Jesus needs to get our attention to embrace the life God created us for and the life Jesus came to lead us toward.

Our liturgy this morning re-enacts an important Gospel message.

But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; …. 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.

The passing of the peace expresses the command to leave one’s gift at the altar and first be reconciled with one’s sibling, or neighbor or co-worker, and *then* offer the gift. The peace takes place **after** confession and absolution; the peace is an acting out of the need to forgive as we have been forgiven. It is more than the chance to say hi to each other. It symbolizes making relationships right. The offertory at Eucharist continues the ancient temple practice of offering gifts at the altar as an act of thanksgiving, of commitment to and reconciliation with God. Then we receive Communion, strengthening the bonds of our healed fellowship. Reconciliation doesn’t always roll out smoothly; it may take months, or even years. In such cases, receive Communion for sustenance and strength, for hope and willingness to heal what needs to be healed.

Living in right relationship with God and with our neighbor sounds easier than it is. It requires our intentional change, our creative efforts, and our loving hearts. With that secure, enjoy the game this evening, or a wonderful concert right here at St. David’s. Celebrate life and those you love.

Thanks be to God.