

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's gospel reading reminded me of my first trip to a dentist in La Jolla. It was a traumatic event. I've had cause to mention it before. I still have nightmares about it. I put it off for a long time. I was worried that I would open my mouth and all the dentists' prejudices and fears about British dentistry would be confirmed. Finally, I plucked up the courage to go. I made an appointment at 9:00 in the morning. I thought I'll do it early, get it over with, plan the rest of my day. Had someone coming to see me at 10:00, and I thought the day would go well.

So I got to the dentist at 9:00, and he had a look at me, handed me over to his hygienist. She got to work on me. She was very thorough. It got to about 9:45. I thought, "I better mention that I had a 10:00 appointment." So I said to her, "Hi ha hyonga." She said, "Pardon?" I said, "How much longer?" She said, "An hour." I said, "An hour?" I said, "In England, you have 10 minutes with the hygienist twice a year." She said, "That explains a lot." I did a quick calculation and worked out that my first session with the hygienist in La Jolla was worth six years of hygienist's attention in England.

So I had to call my 10:00 appointment and suffer there for another hour. And I learned my lesson. Dentistry in America is very different to dentistry in the UK. In England, if you have most of your own teeth, and you're not in pain, that's enough. If you can eat an apple, that's a bonus. But in America, that's not enough. You have to have your own teeth, you have to be not in pain, you have to be able to eat an apple, and your teeth have to be perfectly straight and brilliant white.

The way I feel about Americans and their teeth is just how the Pharisees felt in the gospel about Jesus and his teaching of the law. They too were thinking the bar has been set too high. They were upset that what they'd been doing just simply wasn't enough, wasn't acceptable. They'd heard Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, and they thought, "Well, we keep the law. We don't murder. We don't commit adultery. We don't swear. Are you saying that's not enough, Jesus? You want us to do more?" Because

they heard Jesus say, "The law says, 'You shall not murder,' but I say to you, don't stay angry with people. The law says, 'You shall not commit adultery,' but I say to you, don't look lustfully at anyone." Six times Jesus says, "The law says this, but I say to you." And each time he says that, he raises the bar and sets a much higher standard. "If you want to keep the commandments," he's saying, "you're going to have to do much more. Because what you're doing just isn't enough."

Scholars have argued for years about what Jesus is doing here. Is he contradicting the law, or is he reinforcing it? Is it abolishing the law, or is it radicalizing it? And people have argued both ways, and the passage indeed can be read in both ways. We know from the rest of the New Testament that the emphasis of the teaching in the New Testament is less on the need for words and obedience to the following of the law and the 10 commandments, and more on the need for the gift of faith to receive the grace that God has given in Jesus Christ.

St. Paul is very clear that we're saved not by our own endeavors, by a strict adherence to the law, but by the free gift of God's grace. He says this in Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not the result of words, so that no one may boast."

So if that's the case, there are those who conclude that the law is obsolete. But that doesn't really fit with what Jesus is saying here. Just before the passage that we heard read, he says this, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all is accomplished." He came not to abolish the law, he says, but to fulfill it.

The answer to this conundrum might be said to lie in an acorn, the seeds of a big oak tree. Imagine that I had a little acorn in my hand. How could I get rid of it? Well, two ways is I could smash it with a hammer into smithereens, or I could plant it in the ground. In time, if the conditions were right, it would grow into an oak tree. The acorn will disappear as it's taken up

into something more glorious. An acorn is fulfilled when it becomes a tree.

If we stay with the image a moment longer, I think we can understand the teaching of Jesus by thinking of the Old Testament law as an acorn. Jesus isn't here abolishing the law. He's not dashing it with a hammer. He's not saying it's no good. Instead, he's trying to plant the law in the hearts of his believers. He's looking to push people beyond thinking that keeping the law is all about simply doing the right thing, to recognizing that the law was given by God to be a guide for living that flows out of the heart. Or to quote the Old Testament passages, the reading in the Psalm, that it's a way about walking in the Lord. Walking his way is the goal.

So Jesus is pushing his followers from a mere exterior observation to internal transformation. He's saying keeping the law isn't hard work, it's heart work. He's seeking to plant that law, that seed in their hearts. In the Old Testament, under the old covenant, the emphasis was on the need to keep the commandments so that we could earn God's favor so he might look kindly on us.

In the New Testament under the new covenant, mediated by Jesus Christ, we find that God's favor, his salvation, comes not as a reward for keeping the commandments, but rather as a response to his free gift of grace. We respond to that invitation from God in Christ, and we seek to follow him, to walk his ways, to live out the spirit of the commandments in our lives.

That's the shift that we see beginning in the teaching of Jesus. Jesus is saying, "Keeping the law is not about earning God's favor, but it's a way of living in response to God's grace." His grace compels us to walk this way. He's showing us a way to live life. This is the life that we're called to choose. As the Deuteronomist says, "Choose life. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him." Choosing life, choosing to accept God's free gift of himself in Christ Jesus, the free gift of his salvation. We received that gift of new life, and our heart is renewed. This is how we should aspire to live.

What we see in the Sermon on the Mount is not a rule book, but the ideal way to live, the way we were created to live. The ideal of the New Testament isn't a life lived by the rules. It's a life lived in the knowledge and company of God, which is why at 10:00 in other services where we sing hymns, we never sing hymns about keeping the rules. We sing hymns celebrating God's love and God's grace. Our goal isn't to follow the rules more closely, our goal is to walk more closely with God, leaning on his grace. The life we're called to is the life of the spirit which flows out of a renewed heart.

So as I close, let me return to the acorn image as it relates to the epistle that we heard from 1 Corinthians. Paul there says, "God gives the growth." So how are we going to encourage that acorn, the seed of faith that God has planted in our hearts? How do we encourage that to grow, to open ourselves up enough for God to give the growth? How are we going to grow in God's grace? Perhaps Lent, which is coming up soon, is a good time to ponder that question, to give an opportunity for that seed of faith to grow in our hearts, because there are things that we can do to encourage spiritual growth.

Last year, over 40 of us responded to Rebecca's challenge to read the Bible in a year. If we've kept that up, we're pretty close to the end now. I know that lots of people found that encouraging. This year, Rebecca's organized a series of Wednesday evenings on the enneagram, which is an ancient spiritual practice, which many people, including some here, have found an encouragement to spiritual growth. So maybe that's something we can think about this Lent. There may be other things, other ways that you might be able to use Lent to choose life. Let us choose the spiritual life, which renews our hearts and leads us into spiritual growth.