

Lev. 19:1-2,9-18; 1 Cor. 3:10-11,16-23; Matt. 5:38-48
Seventh Sunday After the Epiphany

Turned Upside Down

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Christ Church Cambridge
February 20, 2011

Good evening! My name is Patrick Cheng, and I teach early church history and systematic theology at the Episcopal Divinity School just down the street. Thank you so much for having me as your guest preacher tonight at the Harvard Episcopal Chaplaincy. I'm really excited to be here.

Before I begin, however, I wanted to disclose to you, right up front, that I did my undergraduate work at that "other school" in New Haven, Connecticut. You know, "Boola Boola," bulldogs, and all that. So thank you in advance for not hissing in church. And I hope that you will take to heart tonight's gospel imperative to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"!

One of the favorite parts of my job so far at EDS is working with our first-year seminarians on their vocational goals. Cameron tells me that you have been talking about vocation during this season of Epiphany – this glorious (albeit rather extended) season of light, revelation, and manifestation.

I think vocation is a wonderful theme for Epiphany. However, tonight's passage from the Sermon on the Mount made me wonder about exactly what kind of job any esteemed Harvard – or Yale – graduate could actually take as a true follower of Jesus.

- First of all, investment banking and finance is out, since we're not supposed to refuse anyone who wants to borrow from us.
- Professional sports is out, since we're supposed to turn the other cheek if someone strikes us.
- Academia is out, since we're supposed to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.
- And becoming a lawyer is certainly out, since, if someone wants to sue us for our coat, we're supposed to hand over our cloak also.

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I tell you this because, before coming to EDS, I was a practicing lawyer for seventeen years – ten of which I served as a lawyer to the national pension fund of the Episcopal Church. And, not only was I a lawyer, but I was a *tax* lawyer to boot! (Well, at least I was on the opposite side of those reviled tax collectors that keep on popping up in the gospels.)

Yes, I spent three years in the early 1990s right across the Cambridge Common at Harvard Law School. I did everything “right” by HLS standards: executive editor of the Harvard Law Review, federal appellate clerkship, associate at a Wall Street law firm. And I was a practicing Roman Catholic at that time, so I attended St. Paul’s in the Square.

Now if someone had told me twenty years ago that I would end up back in Cambridge as a professor in an Episcopal seminary with a Ph.D. in systematic theology, as an ordained Protestant minister, and be giving a homily in Christ Church at the Harvard Episcopal Chaplaincy, I would have laughed in their face. I would have thought that they were about as ridiculous as the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and Matthew 5:38-48.

Which leads me back to my original question: How can we understand the challenging teachings of tonight’s gospel reading in light of our own vocational reflection?

For me, tonight’s gospel is not just a list of bright-line ethical commands – that is, rigid do’s and don’ts. It’s not just about following the holiness code in the Hebrew Scriptures reading from Leviticus, or the statutes and commandments that are praised by the Psalmist. Yes, these are all wonderful – and important – ways to live one’s life, but the gospel is so much more than that.

For me, tonight’s gospel, with all of its challenging and countercultural teachings, is a window into the fact that *God’s logic is not our logic*. The hermeneutical key lies in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians in which he says that the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. That is, the “Lord knows the thoughts of the wise,” and that the thoughts of the wise are “futile.”

Have you noticed that the Bible is filled with similar notions of “queering,” or turning upside down, the values of this world? Elsewhere in First Corinthians, Paul reminds us that God uses the foolish to shame the wise, and that the weak will shame the strong. Second Isaiah proclaims that every valley will be exalted and the mountains made low. The *Magnificat* in Luke says that the lowly will be lifted up, and the mighty on their thrones will be cast down.

Conventional wisdom tells us that the notion of a Messiah – the Savior of the world – who is crucified on the cross as an outcast and a convicted criminal is not only bizarre, but it is obscene. God’s logic is not our logic.

It's not so much that we must renounce the world and live as modern-day desert monastics or martyrs or mystics. It's not that teaching at a seminary is intrinsically more righteous than practicing as a lawyer. Trust me, it's not. Rather, it's about being open to the fact that our world can – and probably will – be turned upside down if we are faithful to the gospel and to God's radical grace and love for us.

The good news of God's radical grace and love is incredibly difficult for any of us to fathom. We simply cannot believe that God's radical love for us – that is, the Word made flesh, crucified, and risen – is not only *not* conditioned on what we do, but this radical love incarnate exists *in spite* of what we do.

God's radical love for us is such an alien concept, that it is really hard for us to imagine a God who would never refuse anyone who asks to borrow something. A God who turns the other cheek. A God who loves God's enemies. And, yes, a God who would give a cloak – in addition to a coat – to those of us who are inclined to litigate or sue.

Let's face it, none of us will be perfect as our heavenly Creator is perfect, not even with our Harvard pedigrees. Not in this life, and certainly not on this side of the Eschaton. It's really, really hard to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. (Trust me, I'm still working on that one.)

What we *can* do, however, is to pray for some insight into the truth that God's logic is not our logic. That God's wisdom is not our wisdom.

And perhaps that insight will free us – just a teeny tiny bit – to be turned upside down by God's radical grace and love, no matter where that might take us on our vocational journeys.

+Amen.