

February 13, 2011

Psalm 119:1-8; Matthew 5:21-37

Karen and I continue to appreciate the many prayers and signs of love and care that people have shown to our daughter Sarah as she continues her Peace Corps service in Namibia. She and we are already looking forward to this coming Christmas (45 weeks from now... but who's counting?)

It's no secret that I had (at best) mixed emotions about Sarah's decision to become a Peace Corps volunteer. It continues to be hard to not be in more regular contact, but I'm adjusting (like so many of you have had to adjust when it comes to being some distance from loved ones- even for a time).

I've been taking particular joy in watching Sarah learn about classroom management in her work in the school in the village where she lives, in Namibia. It is especially fun for me to watch Sarah work out the rules for her classroom, and how she will enforce those rules.

When I was thinking about this recently, I remembered something that happened many years ago. It may go down in our family's history as "Sarah's Oreo Incident".

One afternoon when Sarah was in Kindergarten, Karen had the boys at an Orthodontist appointment or something and I was doing some studying in the parsonage. Sarah was home too, and she came up to me to ask if she could have an Oreo cookie. I was hardly paying attention to her but I probably said something like- "No you better hold off until after we have our meal. It'll ruin your supper." That was, of course, one of our firm rules. And I sort of zoned back into my reading. A few minutes later, I caught some movement out of the corner of my eye as Sarah was quietly making her way up the stairs. I don't know what it was about her movements that made me curious, but I asked: "What are you doing, Sarah?" "Oh... I'm going to go brush my teeth." "Oh. Ok." But then, something sort of clicked for me so while she was at about the 4<sup>th</sup> step- which put her at eye level with my height, walking over to the stairs, I said- "Hold on a minute there Sarah. Let me take a look inside your mouth."

And you know, along with a lot of Oreo cookie crumbs that might be one of the most horrible sights I have ever looked at, was this heart-breakingly clear view of big crocodile tears welling up out of her eyes... (little girl, crying on the steps with her Mom not home)... So now what was I to do? It was like I was somehow the bad-guy here! And I didn't even get the Oreo before supper!

Prediction: "Oreo Cookies"... next year... that's what I predict it will say on my Epiphany star!

Rules can be tough on a person at times.

Don't eat cookie before you have a meal.

Treat your brother or sister with the respect you want them to show you.

Don't steal.

Don't lie.

Don't kill.

Don't have an extra-marital affair.

Even though people generally agree with the rules, situations can arise that makes following them anything but easy.

Our gospel reading today continues the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' message was described as good news, so maybe he'll make it easier on us... or, maybe not.

Here's how Eugene Peterson puts it in his translation of today's reading from Matthew's gospel:

"You're familiar with the command to the ancients, 'Do not murder.' I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother 'idiot!' and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell 'stupid!' at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.

It isn't just ones outer obedience that matters, when it comes to God's laws (or rules). It's also

the place of ones heart too. Maybe that's because what is given room inside our hearts, is so much more liable to eventually find its way into action.

God help us. I really mean that. God help us, because more and more I know that our only real hope for life as a disciple of Jesus, is from God's help.

It's a little bit like the concept of recycling what should be recycled... only recognizing that when it comes to lives of true wholeness, not everything should be recycled at all. Ever. I mean, sometimes we recycle and throw away, like we shouldn't.

Environmentally, it's possible to throw away the things that should be recycled. Spiritually, it's possible to recycle the things that it would be better to throw away.

Aluminum, plastic, old motor oil, batteries--- recycle, but too often they're thrown away.

Bad habits, unloving attitudes, grudges from the past, even disappointment held onto for years and years, JUDGMENTLISM toward others--- throw away, but too often they're recycled over and over.

I remember hearing once: "If you find yourself getting deeper into a hole, and you want to get out of it, stop digging."

But too often, doing more seems to be the only way that's tried when it comes to turning our lives around, and getting our relationships back on track. I came upon a list about how sometimes doing less is what's needed to bring important change to our lives:

- If you are losing touch with your spouse or your children because your work schedule is so busy - don't think scheduling more family busy-ness together is the answer.
  - If you want to be healthy, ... stop doing those things that

harm you.

- If you want harmony in your life, ... stop doing those things that cause discord.

- If you want peace in the world, ... stop doing those things that lead to war.

- If you want a closer relationship with your children, ... stop doing those things and saying those things that build up walls between you.

- If you want to rekindle the romance in your marriage, ... stop doing those things that create animosity and boredom.

- If you want to live in a close-knit, caring community, ... stop hiding behind your front door.

- If you want a spiritual life that fills you up, ... stop pouring all your energies everywhere but toward God.

I believe we have hope, and that it is possible just to stop bad, destructive behavior. But it is not easy. The cornerstone of Alcoholics Anonymous has long been that alcoholics must practice complete abstinence if they are to recover from their addiction. Yet it takes a tremendous amount of energy to renew that dedication to stop doing a destructive behavior each and every day, one day at a time. That is why AA and other "12-step" programs rely heavily on creating supportive communities of their peers - others who have "stopped it" and will stand by each other on those inevitable bad days. This is what Jesus calls the church to do as a community of faith dedicated to growing toward lives that live God's rules on the outside... and on the inside both.

The part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that we heard read today, touched on several of God's rules for behavior in the human community- whether between those we'd call brothers or sisters, or strangers, or inside our own hearts and minds . If we summarized the rules Jesus mentions,we might end up saying: "Actions matter to God... but so do attitudes." And Jesus' message calls us to self-examination of our attitudes as well as our actions.

More and more, I'm sensing that God is on the move in us as a church family, and I like how that feels. It always feels good to me to see signs of God's presence in our lives.

And it's good news if we choose to receive it: We can have a new marriage ... a new body ... a new attitude ... a new spirit ... a new career ... a new community ... a new world - **but not always by DOING more...**

Sometimes, the new life in Christ will only happen by stopping the old destructive, hurtful behaviors that are so easy to keep recycling... even over many years.

I want to close by offering something in my own defense when it comes to Oreo cookie eating, before having supper.

The rule was meant for Sarah's own good because I love her.

God's rules are meant for our good too. Because God loves us.

Amen.