

Epiphany 6 Year A 2001

The reading from Deuteronomy this morning is part of Moses' long farewell speech to the Israelites as they are about to cross the Jordan River and enter into the Promised Land and it is one of my favorite readings from the Old Testament. But before I go on I'm guessing right now that most of you aren't really able to listen to what I'm saying because you're wondering more about why I'm standing here with a big fat black and blue eye. So I'll tell you what happened. Thursday afternoon while doing my chores at home my foot slipped going up some steps from my kitchen and down I went. Fortunately nothing was broken and no stitches were needed, but my forehead took the full brunt of my fall into the door jam, and I can tell you it hurt. And still does. For peace of mind I went to the emergency room Thursday night as the swelling got bigger and the color purple got darker as blood pooled around my eye. But now it seems to be doing just what the doctor suspected it would do, and the goose egg on my eyebrow is growing smaller, and the bruising around my eye is spreading out and dropping lower down into my face.

The interesting thing about something like my black eye is its visibility. We tend to notice things on the outside. We tend to see one another's afflictions to the degree that they are visible. We see each other's physical limitations, wounds and scars, and public behaviors. We try to express our thoughts, feelings, and agendas in writing or in speech. Most of the time we notice what is visible or audible to our eyes and ears. But what about the less visible? What about the less visible afflictions, the emotional limitations, and the wounds and scars from the lives we have lived, and the sufferings we have endured? We are often quick to judge, quick to act, and quick to assume things based on the limited nature of what we can see, hear, and experience.

In the Gospel this morning Jesus uses these kinds of outward images to talk about what is really underneath our exterior behavior. And what he says is that the exterior behavior is preceded by an inner behavior. Jesus equates anger against brother and sister with murder, adultery with inner lust, and swearing an oath to courting the evil one. Jesus seems to be

calling us to pay attention to the thought that precedes the action and asks us to examine what is not necessarily visible or obvious.

I have a true story to share with you written by a husband named Joe. He writes, “When my wife, Beth, and I moved from the suburbs to a warehouse loft in the center of a large city, Beth embraced every aspect of urban life—even the sirens, the parking problems, and the car alarms at night. The homeless people made me nervous, but Beth learned their names. The only neighbors who bothered her were the guys who ran the tattoo parlor across the street. They got into traffic-stopping fights, harassed women on the sidewalk, and intimidated men. They were the reason Beth didn’t walk on that side of the street.

For two years she glared out our window at the row of men sitting in front of the shop and shooting out their tires. Then one day she called me at work to tell me she was getting a tattoo. She’d never wanted a tattoo before and had even taken pride in being one of the few people in our group of friends with no body art. Though surprised, I said OK.

Later she called me back and announced, “I did it.” When I got home, Beth excitedly showed me the delicately inscribed words “Love thy neighbor” on her wrist. She explained how she’d marched across the street and gone into the tattoo parlor. The walls were covered with drawings of skulls, bloody knives, naked women, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Manuel, the proprietor, was working on somebody’s backside. Beth introduced herself as his neighbor and asked if she could watch. He said sure.

After a while, she went outside and sat in front to study the world from their perspective. The guy next to her asked what she was getting done.

“Love thy neighbor,” she muttered.

“Why?” he asked.

“Well, you guys are my neighbors, and I’m having trouble loving you. You kind of scare me—you know, with all the fights that break out over here and all.”

He ushered her back into the shop and announced with complete sincerity, “Manuel, dude, we’re scaring our neighbors! We got to stop fighting.”

Manuel was defensive—until Beth explained that she didn’t want to change him; she just wanted to get this tattoo. Manuel showed her a picture in a magazine of “Love thy neighbor” tattooed on a man’s inner forearm—with bloody knives in the background. “Not exactly,” said Beth.

After they’d settled on a design, Manuel began to do his art on her wrist. Then he stopped. “How do you spell *thy*?” he asked shyly. “I didn’t go to school.” The other tattoo artist piped in, “Dude, it’s not because you didn’t go to school. It’s because you don’t read the Bible!”

From then on Beth would wave to the tattoo artists as if they were old pals. The music from across the street was not so grating to her nerves. No more fights broke out. The sidewalk felt safe.

Four months later, Beth took our car in for an oil change and saw Manuel talking to the repairman behind the counter. As she began to remind him who she was, he stepped forward and gave her a warm hug. “Hey,” he said to his friend behind the counter, “this is my neighbor, the one I was telling you about.” —Joe Slevcove in *The Sun* (Aug. 2007).

I think this story is amazing and it invites us to ask a multitude of questions about ourselves. Let me give you a few examples.

- How often do you stop to imagine that the world does not revolve around you?
- Are you open to how other people see the world?
- Do you make an inquiry into what judgments you hold inside your heart against your brothers and sisters?
- How often do you consider the scars and wounds that your brothers and sisters have which you cannot see?
- How is God calling you to be open to what you do not yet understand?

The reading from Deuteronomy this morning is a favorite of mine because of what Moses proclaims about God. As the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land Moses said, “I call heaven and earth to witness

against you today that I have set before you lifeanddeath,
....blessings.... and curses..... **Choose life.**" Moses as the voice of God
presented a clear choice before the people and that choice is as good for us
today as it was for the Israelites back then. The universe and all that is in it
contains life and death, blessings and curses.

And God says **choose life**because**God is life.**
Amen.