

As good a job as our lectionary does in delivering segments of the gospel to us, occasionally its sound-bite methodology obscures the big picture of Jesus’ message. Today’s gospel lesson is a good example. These four verses from Matthew chapter five are part of Jesus’ teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount. But because Jesus got away with much longer sermons than any Episcopal priest would dare deliver today, our lectionary has broken Jesus’ sermon into many lessons, each used on a different day.

Our lesson tonight comes after the “Beatitudes,” the “Blessed are” statements in the Sermon on the Mount, and after the “You are the salt of the earth” and “You are the light of the world” statements. Tonight’s lesson is the first of the three parts that together are called the “ethical teaching” of Jesus’ sermon, this one his ethical teaching on the Law.



Jesus was wading into the political question of his day: “How was a God-fearing person supposed to respond to a foreign pagan power occupying the land that God had given them?” The Pharisees’ answer was to appease the occupying powers while turning inward to keep their identity intact and their worship pure until God came and rescued them. The Zealots’ answer was more like, “God helps those who help themselves;” they urged guerilla insurgency, if not outright warfare, against the Roman occupiers.

What was Jesus’ answer? Earlier in his sermon, Jesus rejected the Zealot’s agenda by blessing the meek. But Jesus didn’t reject the Zealots themselves. His followers were to pray for their enemies and those with whom they disagreed, and to be kind and generous to them. They were to (we are to) turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and to love even the people who revile us, persecute us, tell lies about us, or just vote differently than we do.

As you might expect, in our gospel lesson tonight Jesus affirms the Law. He said that he didn't come to abolish or even to change the law.

If we confine our thoughts to that snippet of Jesus' sermon, we would think that Jesus was endorsing the way of the Pharisees' isolationist approach to dealing with the cultural and social issues of their day.

But Jesus added that, while he didn't come to abolish the law, he came to fulfill it. If the purpose of the law is to ensure that we are righteous when God comes to us, Jesus' coming would have, indeed, brought the law to completion, to its achievement, and to its realization (that's what fulfillment means). But Jesus was not suggesting an end to the law, but rather that his coming ushered in a new era. When he called his disciples, he said this another way; he said, "The Kingdom of God has drawn near." Our confession says this yet another way, that Jesus "was tempted in every way as we are yet did not sin." The law has, indeed, been fulfilled.

But, while Jesus affirmed the law, he didn't endorse the Sadducees' and Pharisee's approach to the issue of his day, either. Our lesson tonight suggests that hunkering down and keeping our identity intact—while not wrong—is no longer enough as people of God. What Jesus was saying was that "We are who we are—the people of God—to do the work that God has given us to do in the world, not to hide out and preserve our identity for future use." It's time to use that identity we have preserved through the ages; it's time to claim Christ Jesus and BE Christ Jesus, within the law.