

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, February 12, 2023

6 Epiphany, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

[Deuteronomy 30:15-20](#)

[1 Corinthians 3:1-9](#)

[Matthew 5:21-37](#)

[Psalms 119:1-8](#)

+++

A couple of weeks ago it became clear that our family's eight-year-old Macintosh computer was reaching the end of its career, and I logged onto the Apple Store to see about ordering a replacement. And I found myself logged into the education section of the site, which offers discounts to students and faculty in educational institutions. Now eight years ago when I last ordered a computer from Apple I was a doctoral student. And as I clicked through my shopping cart toward checkout I saw that a hundred-dollar discount was being applied. And I thought, nice! I still get the education discount! And then a screen popped up that said: by continuing you are vouching that you are a current student or faculty member in an educational institution. And I thought: argh!

And then a little voice inside my head said: it's fine, Stephen. You qualified for it in the past and it's a great discount. Just go with it. You still guest-lecture a class or two at the seminary every year, doesn't that kind of make you faculty? A priest is basically a kind of teacher anyway. And Apple is a huge corporation and doesn't need the difference.

They're the ones that engineer their computers for planned obsolescence anyway, they deserve to have somebody stick it to them a little. No one will know or care. Just click Purchase.

And a competing voice in my head said: Come on, Shaver! You know you're not really in school anymore. You have a great full-time job and you're married to a physician and you have all kinds of financial privilege and you can afford the hundred dollars. Do you really want to tell a lie?

And I thought, dang it! I really wanted that discount. But I put on my big pants and logged out and went to the regular section of the store and paid full price.

Just a little everyday moral dilemma I share with you. You probably have ones like this pretty regularly, as I do. Of course I shared one where I ended up doing what was probably the right thing. There are others I'd probably have a harder time admitting to publicly.

We are gathered here in a church in the name of Jesus and today we hear part of the Sermon on the Mount which is probably his single clearest and starkest teaching on the kind of moral life and character God desires for us. As followers of Jesus we are seeking to be transformed. We want—I hope we want—our faith lives to be connected to our moral lives, to the kind of choices we make in the world and the kind of character we are forming with all those choices.

It's sometimes said that evangelical churches focus more on individual morality and more liberal or mainline churches focus more on social morality, which I think is to some extent true. Evangelical churches often bring people up against questions like: what's your sex life like? What's your relationship with alcohol and other substances like? How often are you praying? What are the media you tend to look at and listen to and what effect are they having on your spirit? While if you go to an Episcopal church you might attend for a long time without being asked any uncomfortable questions about those topics—although you might hear a lot about big collective issues like racism and climate change and access to housing.

The fact is we need both. God calls us both to collective transformation and to individual holiness. We might have a different understanding than some of our evangelical siblings about exactly what constitutes a holy sex life lived with integrity. It might not be so black and white as one man-one woman-within-marriage et cetera, but it's still absolutely true that sex is one of the arenas of our lives that's most directly connected to the depths of our humanity and where God calls us to be the kind of people who keep our promises, live with integrity, and treat one another as fully human, priceless children of God. We might have more flexible answers about what substances or media can be appropriate or what forms a healthy life of prayer can take, but if our faith has absolutely no relationship with the choices we make in those arenas then there's something wrong that's preventing our faith practice from sinking into who we really are.

It's also true that we can have the best individual piety in the world and still fail to be transformed, and there are systems of collective sin that are bigger than we are as individuals. It's good that I told the truth and didn't take that discount. But that doesn't get me off the hook for asking the deeper questions about where my

computer was made and by whom and in what conditions and with what impact on the earth, or about why I have the disposable income to buy a computer and even forego a hundred-dollar discount without thinking too much about it while more than half of the people in this country wouldn't be able to meet an unexpected \$1,000 emergency bill without taking on debt. It's easy to ignore those questions, but the fact we may not have clear answers and can't solve them just as individuals doesn't absolve us from asking them and seeking to make honest choices in our own place and time.

In two weeks we will enter the holy season of Lent, a time for simplicity and self-examination, a time to turn away from what keeps us from God's kingdom, a time to turn toward God and one another. It is good that we approach this season with the words of this Sermon on the Mount ringing in our ears. Jesus points us to a whole new way of life where it's not enough to not kill your brother, even calling him a fool is holding you back from the kingdom. It's not enough not to hit on that person, just the dehumanizing way you're thinking about her is holding you back from the kingdom. When Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven he's not talking just about an afterlife destination. The kingdom of heaven is something we can begin to taste and experience here and now when we are in right relationship with God and with one another. When we're not in that right relationship then by definition we're not enjoying the kingdom of heaven. And if we're not practicing it in this life then we won't be fit to know it or enjoy it even when it's offered to us in the next.

We are not talking about getting into heaven by being good little boys and girls who turn in our homework on time and don't get our names written up on the board. We are not talking about what one wise preacher has called transactional Christianity, earning enough points to avoid punishment or get a reward.¹ We are talking about being transformed into saints, a transformation we can't do on our own, but that God's Spirit can work within us when we open ourselves to it.

There's a story about two of the ancient monks of the desert. *Abba Lot came to Abba Joseph and said: "Father, to the limit of my ability, I keep my little rule, my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and to the limit of my ability, I work to cleanse my heart of unwholesome thoughts; what more should I do?" The elder rose up in reply, and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: "Why not be utterly changed into fire?"*²

¹ Debie Thomas, "But I Say to You," February 9, 2020, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2525-but-i-say-to-you>.

² From the Sayings of Abba Lot, widely quoted in various places online, as at <https://davidofbuffalo.wordpress.com/2012/03/19/on-being-utterly-changed-into-fire/>.