Sunday January 30, 2005

ALTERNATIVE WISDOM

Micah 6:8, Matthew 5:1-12

There's no part of the Bible that is so highly praised and so little known and practiced as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5,6 and 7. That's also true of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. People talk about the importance of the Ten Commandments all the time but know very few of them and pay even less attention to those they know.

I've always appreciated what Mark Twain had to say about the Bible. When he heard people complain that the Bible is difficult to understand, he said that he was bothered more about the parts of

the Bible that he could understand than he was about the parts he could not understand.

One of my favorite tactics when someone says to me, “The trouble with people in our time is that they don’t follow the Ten Commandments,” is to say in response, “I agree with you. Would you please recite the Ten Commandments.” Most people can recite one or two of them, usually, “You shall not steal” and “You shall not kill.” Almost everyone forgets or doesn’t know the first one, “You shall have no other gods before me.” And many people conveniently forget or don’t know number ten and if they know it don’t pay attention to it, “You shall not covet.” Maybe it’s a good thing because a large part of our consumer economy is built on motivating

people to covet so that they will make purchases and keep the economy growing.

Many of you will remember the controversy when Alabama Supreme Court Judge Roy Moore placed a two-ton monument on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed in the Supreme Court Building in Alabama. Under court order it was finally removed. Later it was taken on tour. At one stop there were some protesters and a little pushing and shoving took place. One of the supporters of the Ten Commandments who heard about it said, "It's a good thing I wasn't guarding the Ten Commandments because I would've killed someone." He forgot about that commandment, "You shall not kill."

Jesus had a number of additions or revisions to the Ten Commandments in his teachings as recorded in the Sermon on the Mount. His additions are often called “alternative wisdom” because they contradict much of the conventional wisdom of his time and ours. Here are several examples. “You have heard that it was said, “You shall not kill, and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you, that if you are angry with another human being you will be liable to judgment.” “You have heard the commandment, you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and

pray for those who persecute you."

Another excellent example of the alternative wisdom in the teachings of Jesus is found in the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew 5:1-12). It is the most widely quoted part of his teachings which are called "the beatitudes." The word 'beatitude" literally means, "this is how you find happiness." Thus some of the newer translations of the Bible use the word "happy" instead of the word "blessed." "Happy are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." "Happy are those who mourn for they shall be comforted."

More than anything else the beatitudes tell you how to find true happiness in life. But it's alternative, not

conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom would never say, “Blessed and happy are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.” Instead conventional wisdom says, “Happy are the assertive for they shall get ahead of everyone else.”

Happy is a popular word and concept. You are all familiar with the simple drawing of a happy face—a circle with two dots inside for its eyes, one dot for the nose and an upturned line for a smile.

Conventional wisdom gives you many suggestions for finding happiness. Some are very personal such as—“Happiness is getting to sleep late on Sunday morning.” Of if you’re a four-year old, “Happiness is not having to take a bath.” The

culture is filled with its own kind of conventional wisdom on how to find happiness. It's commonly assumed that the more money you have the happier you will be. That's why people buy lottery tickets.

Or happiness is being able to be completely independent and autonomous.

Personally I like the song which expresses the opposite point of view. "The more we get together, together, together, the more we get together, the happier we'll be, for your friends are my friends and my friends are your friends; the more we get together the happier we'll be."

So it is that most of the ways to find happiness described in the beatitudes subvert the

conventional wisdom with alternative wisdom.

Do have a favorite beatitude? I do. My favorite is: "Happy are the pure in heart for they shall see God." You've met people who are pure in heart. I know I have. Maybe it's my favorite because "pure" of anything is a rare experience in life.

Remember the Ivory Soap commercials which told you that it was 99 and 44/100 percent pure. According to my mathematics, that leaves only 56/100 percent not pure. I looked at a bar of Ivory Soap the other day to see if anything had changed and there it was printed right on the wrapper, 99 and 44/100 percent pure. Then I began to wonder, what is that little bit of impurity? How does it differ

from the rest of the ingredients? Would it be possible to make it 100% pure?

Purity! What was Jesus talking about when he said, “Happy are the pure in heart for they shall see God?” First of all, to be pure in heart does not mean that you are morally perfect or that you have never made a mistake. Nor does it imply that you think only pure thoughts and obey all the rules all the time without exception.

Furthermore, being pure in heart does not mean you are naive, the kind of person who can be easily fooled or that you never recognize evil when you see it. In fact, the pure in heart are more able to

distinguish good from evil than those who are not pure in heart.

Those who are pure in heart do not gloss over evil, tragedy and suffering as if they did not exist. The pure in heart are able to see beyond such things. When Helen Keller was able to say about her blindness and deafness, "I thank God for my handicaps for through them I have found myself, my work and my God," that is being able to transcend her differences from others. That is being pure in heart.

The Bible says, "And Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was." In thick darkness! What a place to find God! The pure in heart are

those who have enough understanding and depth to find and experience God even in thick darkness.

The pure in heart are able to see the truth more clearly than most people. The pure in heart actively pursue the truth. They are also aware that they do not have all the truth and will never know all the truth. At the same time the pure in heart are always open to discovering new truth. They are not afraid to examine their pre-conceptions, their biases and their assumptions.

In addition, to be pure in heart means that you do not hang onto hate or resentment. Every human being feels hate or resentment or both at times. However if you hold onto such feelings, cultivating

them, tending them like plants in a garden so that they grow and prosper, it keeps you from being pure in heart.

The fact is that some people seem to need enemies in order to justify themselves. Unless they see themselves as over against something or other, they do not feel secure. They define themselves by what they are against rather than what they are for.

For example, most people are truly joyful that what was called the “Cold War” no longer exists since the breakup of the former Soviet Union. But there were those who had difficulty in adjusting. I remember a comic strip in the early years following the absence of the cold war in which a woman

takes her husband to a psychiatrist because he has lost his will to live. After the initial interview the doctor tells her, "The fading of the cold war has left a terrible void inside your husband. He will need a lot of care until he finds a new enemy."

People who are pure in heart do not need enemies to have a purpose for living.

Parenthetically, I am convinced that we need some new metaphors instead of defining all of our problems by using the term "war." We had a war on poverty, a war on drugs, and now a war on terrorism. We're always declaring war on a problem. I don't know what new metaphors can be found, but we need to find some.

"Happy are the pure in heart." The pure in heart want to work to solve problems. They oppose evil but they do not seek revenge. They do not rejoice at wrong, but are kind, loving, forgiving, gentle people.

The pure in heart do not try to mislead others. They are not devious and underhanded. Their motives are transparent and they are open and honest and straightforward in their approach. The pure in heart are people you can trust with anything.

"Happy are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." They see God where others miss God. It's not difficult to experience the presence of God in the beautiful parts of life—in a sunset, or a

mountaintop, or on a lovely warm day with sunshine. It's natural to talk of experiencing the Sacred in terms of a loving relationship, an unexpected pleasant surprise, the warm smile of a friend, in a new-born baby.

The pure in heart also experience the Holy in unlikely places. They can see God in a broken-down bum, in a prison inmate, in a juvenile delinquent, in a forgotten person in a nursing home, in the person who has AIDS, in the secular humanist, in a person who defines his or her religious faith in terms different from theirs, in an extreme right wing Republican, and in the far to the left-wing Democrat. The pure in heart see through labels. The problem with labels is that as soon as

you slap a label on someone, understanding has stopped at that moment. The label squeezes them into less than they are.

Jesus treated individuals the way he did because he saw God in them. He saw God in the woman about to be stoned to death for committing adultery. He saw God in those who were about to throw the stones. He saw God in Zaccheaus. He saw God in the lonely widow. Once you begin to see God in other people, you begin to act differently toward them and they also respond in a positive way to you.

"Happy are the pure in heart for they shall see God." The pure in heart see God in the movements for justice and peace.

The pure in heart are in many ways like children. That's why Jesus told his followers that unless you become like children you cannot see the presence of God. The wonder of children is that they have so few preconceptions and prejudices until they learn them from adults. Children experience God in unlikely places.

The good news is that it's possible for all of you to experience the Sacred. No matter what your age or your life experience, you can be pure in heart and see God. For some it will mean that you need to slow down at times and cultivate your sense of awareness. Try this. The next time you see a person that repels you, remind yourself that God is in that human being as much as God is in you. The

more you begin to see God in people, the more you will find yourself becoming pure in heart.

Someone once said, “The most difficult things for a human being are not physical feats or intellectual achievement. The most difficult things are three in number: returning love for hate; including the excluded; and admitting that you are wrong. The pure in heart can do these things and you can become pure in heart by doing them. “Happy are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” Amen.