

# Christ, the Light of the World

## Epiphany 7A (Lectionary 7)

Text: Matthew 5:38–48

February 20, 2011

Double Gulp!

One day while talking about the Bible, Mark Twain said:

*I have no problem with those parts of the Bible I don't understand.  
It's those parts of the Bible I do understand that gives me fits.*

The words of Jesus  
that were just read  
certainly fit into that category.

What Jesus says is easy enough to understand,  
but the thought of actually trying follow what he says  
gives us fits.

Last week we heard Jesus proclaim the *new righteousness* of God's kingdom.

This *new righteousness* describes the character of life  
that is lived in the presence of God.

It is a righteousness that  
calls not only for purity in the actions of our lives;  
it calls for absolute purity in our thoughts and words as well.

As if this *new righteousness* isn't tough enough,  
today we hear Jesus  
taking it even further.

As he continues to lift up the kind of righteousness  
that is expected of the citizens of God's kingdom,  
he moves from theory to application.

It is one thing to have Jesus  
describe the righteousness that is characteristic  
of the people of God's kingdom theoretically.

Within the kingdom  
where the grace and love of God rules over  
the hearts and minds of God's people,  
the purity of heart Jesus calls for  
is understandable,  
even if it is unattainable.

But it is quite another thing  
to see how this *new righteousness*  
plays out

when  
the *rubber meets the road*  
in real life.

In the movie *Witness* ,  
we can see the problems this *new righteousness* of Jesus causes for us  
when it collides with the wisdom and reality of the world.

Harrison Ford plays John Book,  
 a tough Philadelphia detective  
 who uncovers corruption within the Philadelphia Police Department.  
 To protect himself and a young boy who has witnessed a murder,  
 Book hides out among the Pennsylvania Amish,  
 the community from which the boy comes.

In one scene,  
 Book and several of the Amish  
 go into town for a day of shopping.  
 While they are in town,  
 the buggies driven by the Amish  
 are involved in a traffic jam with a car.

The young men in the car decide to have some *fun*.  
 Knowing the Amish will not strike back,  
 they get out of the car to confront the Amish with unwarranted hostility.  
 They taunt and bully one of the young Amish men.  
 One of the guys from the car even smears  
 ice cream in the young Amish man's face.

Ignoring the protests of an older Amish man,  
 Book goes gets out of the wagon  
 and punches out the thugs who have bullied the Amish.  
 The older Amish man tells Book, *It's not our way*.  
 Book replies,  
*Yeah, but it's my way*.

That scene helps us see the vivid contrast  
 between the way of Jesus  
 and the way of the world.

The reason the young Amish man doesn't fight back against the bullies  
 is because he is turning the other cheek,  
 just as Jesus teaches his followers to do.  
 In order to avoid violence,  
 in order to avoid anyone getting hurt,  
 the young Amish man willingly accepts humiliation.

When Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek,  
 it is important to understand that he is not about a situation of self-defense;  
 he is talking about how to respond to an insult.

The image is of someone  
 giving the backhand to another person  
 on the right cheek, as a putdown.  
 The bullies insulted the Amish man,  
 but didn't threaten  
 to physically hurt him.

The progression of the scene from the taunting,  
to the ice cream in the face, to Book punching out the two bullies,  
creates a release of emotions in the movie.

Watching the bullies  
pick on the Amish man  
creates a building anger inside us.

Something inside of us  
doesn't want them to  
get away with what they did.

Something inside of us  
resists hearing and living out  
what Jesus calls us to do in this passage.

Something in us wants to be John Book, not the young Amish man.  
We don't want to turn the other cheek.  
We don't want to love our enemies.

Immaculee Ilibagiza was a 22-year-old university student in the 1990s  
when terrible violence broke out in her home country of Rwanda  
between the Hutus and the Tutsis.

Hutus killed her parents,  
her brothers,  
and hundreds of her Tutsi friends.

A Hutu pastor,  
who risked his life to save her,  
hid her and six other women.

They lived in a small bathroom  
with a wooden wardrobe  
covering the door.

For three months,  
they endured hunger, fear, and the sounds of soldiers in the house  
who were there searching for Tutsis.

In those cramped quarters, Immaculee began to pray the Rosary.  
She always struggled with the *Lord's Prayer* when she came to the petition:  
*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

She knew the *Lord's Prayer* called her  
to forgive those who had killed her family  
and continued to threaten her life.

She didn't think she could do it,  
but she realized she was  
consumed by hate.

She was afraid she would become like the people who had killed her family.  
Nevertheless, in her mind, forgiving her family's killers  
was like forgiving the devil.

Finally, afraid that her hatred would crush her heart,  
she asked God to forgive those who had  
done her so much harm.

Slowly, with God's help, she was able to let go and forgive her family's killers.  
Eventually, she even visited one of her brother's killers in prison,  
taking his hand in hers and offering forgiveness.  
Immaculee Ilibagiza says that forgiveness saved her life.  
*It's a new life,  
almost like a resurrection.*<sup>1</sup>

Double gulp!

It's tough enough to hear the *new righteousness* of Jesus in theory;  
it's even harder when *the rubber meets the road* in real life.

This new righteousness of Jesus is incredibly demanding  
because it calls for an absolute purity  
in all our thoughts, words and deeds.  
Ultimately it is a righteousness  
that is beyond our ability to achieve  
—not that we shouldn't strive for it.

Despite the impossibility of living out the *true righteousness* of the kingdom,  
the good news is the grace of God's forgiving love that is shared with us  
in the death and resurrection of Jesus.  
In the end, that is our only hope to be citizens of the kingdom.  
God's grace alone is our only hope  
to be numbered among the saints of God.



<sup>1</sup> Bob Smietana, "Woman Challenged to Forgive Massacre of Family in Rwanda," *United Methodist Reporter*, 152.51, April 28, 2006, p. 3A.