

Here are a few questions that I would like answered. If we evolved from monkeys and apes, why do we still have monkeys and apes? \*\*\* I went to a bookstore and asked the saleswoman, "Where's the self-help section?" She said if she told me, it would defeat the purpose. \*\*\* If a deaf child signs swear words, does his mother wash his hands with soap?

One way to approach this portion of the Sermon on the Mount is to make use of the narrative pattern. Each topic is introduced with, 'You have heard it was said...', and then is immediately contrasted with Jesus' teaching, 'But I say to you....' 3 of the 4 antitheses refer directly to one of the Ten Commandments ('You shall not murder,' 'You shall not commit adultery,' and 'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor' (EX 20:13, 14, 16; cf. Dt 5:17, 18, 20). The other antithesis addresses the Torah's provision for issuing a certificate of divorce when a husband 'finds something objectionable about her' along with the ensuing prohibition against remarrying his former wife should her next husband die or divorce her (Dt 24:1-4). In each instance, Jesus expands the application of these ancient laws by identifying the deeper reality -- the source for these transgressions -- anger, lust, and lack of truth and honesty. Now that's already too tedious to be of much help. (adapted from HOMILETICS, 12 February 2023)

So let's move on to point 2. What's this whole passage about. Remember, it's from the Sermon on the Mount -- what has been called the 'heart of the gospel,' or 'the gospel within the gospel.' It is the central teaching of Jesus, and it calls us to a much higher standard of discipleship than mere obedience to commandments. It calls us to a wholeness in all that we think, do, and say. It calls us to be holy. So let's talk a bit about holiness. And how do we DO this? Well, the question in life that we all have to answer is, 'What am I going to be?' The question doesn't just go away one day -- it is a lifelong question, one that I still struggle with at age 69. For God's sake, what are we going to be, you and I? When we grow up?

Something in us may rear back in indignation, of course. We are not children anymore -- most of us. Surely we have our growing up behind us. We have come many a long mile and thought many a long thought. We have taken on serious responsibilities, made hard decisions, weathered many a crisis. Surely the question is, rather, what are we now and how well are we doing at it? We like to think that one way or another we have already made our mark on the world. So isn't the question not 'What are we going to be?' but 'What are we now?' Now we simply get on with the game, whatever is left of it for us. That is what life is all about from here on out.

But then. Then maybe we have to listen -- listen back, thousands of years farther back. A thick cloud gathers on the mountain as the Book of Exodus describes it. There are flickers of lightning. A clap of thunder. Suddenly the great SHOPHAR sounds, the ram's horn -- a long-drawn, pulsing note louder than thunder, more dangerous than lightning -- and out of the darkness, out of the mystery, out of some cavernous part of who we are, a voice calls: "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice, and keep my covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all other people" -- my SEGULLAH the Hebrew word is, my precious ones, my darlings -- "and you shall be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation." Do we think of ourselves as God's precious ones, His darlings? We should. We ARE.

Then, thousands of years later but still thousands of years ago, there is another voice to listen to. It is the voice of an old man dictating a letter. There is reason to believe that he may actually have been the one who up till almost the end was the best friend Jesus had: Peter himself. "So put away all malice and all guile and insincerity and envy and all slander," he says. "Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation; for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord." And then he echoes the

great cry out of the thunderclouds with a cry of his own. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people," he says, "that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

What are we going to BE when we grow up? Not what are we going to do, what professions are we going to follow or keep on following, what niche are we going to occupy in the order of things. But what are we going to BE – inside ourselves and among ourselves? That is the question that God answers with the Torah at Sinai. That is the question that the old saint answers in his letter from Rome, and that is what Jesus was telling in His Sermon on the Mount.

HOLY. That is what we are going to be if God gets His way with us. It is wildly unreasonable because it makes a shambles out of all our reasonable ambitions to be this or to be that. It is not really a human possibility at all because holiness is Godness and only God makes holiness possible. But being holy is what growing up in the full sense means. No matter how old we are or how much we have achieved or dream of achieving still, we are not truly grown up until this one extraordinary thing happens. Holiness is what is to happen. Out of darkness we are called into "his marvelous light," Peter writes, who knew more about darkness than most of us, if we stop to think about it, and had looked into the very face itself of Light. We are called to have faces like that – to be filled with light so that we can be bearers of light. I have seen a few such faces in my day, and so have you I am sure.

Henry James said something to his nephew Billy, something that the boy never forgot, and it was this: "There are 3 things that are important in human life. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. The third is to be kind."

Be kind because although kindness is not by a long shot the same thing as holiness, kindness is one of the doors that holiness enters the world through, enters us through – not just gently kind but sometimes fiercely kind.

Be kind enough to ourselves not just to play it safe with our lives for our own sakes, but to spend at least part of our life like drunken sailors – for God's sake, if we believe in God, for the world's sake, if we believe in the world – and thus to come alive truly.

Be kind enough to others to listen, beneath all the words they speak, for that usually unspoken hunger for holiness that I believe is part of even the unlikeliest of us because by listening to it and cherishing it maybe we can help bring it to birth both in them and in ourselves.

Be kind to this nation of ours by remembering that New Haven, New Hope, Shalom are the names not just of our oldest towns but of our holiest dreams, which most of the time are threatened by the madness of no enemy without as dangerously as they are threatened by our own madness within.

"You have tasted the kindness of the Lord," Peter wrote in his Letter, and ultimately that, of course, is the kindness, the holiness, the sainthood and sanity we are all of us called to. So that by God's grace we may "grow up to salvation" at last.

The way the light plays on this crucifix. The sound our silence makes when we come together like this. The sense we have of each other's presence. The feeling in the air that one way or another we are all of us here to give each other our love, and to give God our love. This kind moment itself is a door that holiness enters through. May it enter you. May it enter me. To the world's saving. (adapted from Buechner, SECRETS IN THE DARK: A LIFE IN SERMONS, pages not noted)

Third, holiness is meant for people of all walks of life – for all of us – at every moment in our lives. So I conclude with a story about St. Anthony of Egypt. Once upon a time, more than 1700 years ago, a young man decided to become a saint. He left his home, family and possessions. He said goodbye to relatives and friends, sold all he owned, gave the money to the poor, and walked off into the desert to find God. He walked through the desert sands until he found a dark cave. “Here,” he thought, “I will be alone with God. Here nothing can distract me from God.” He prayed day and night in the dark cave. But God sent him great temptations. He imagined all the good things of life and wanted them desperately. However, he was determined to give up everything in order to have God alone. After many months the temptations stopped. St. Anthony of Egypt was at peace, having nothing but God.

But then, according to legend, God said, “Leave your cave for a few days and go off to a distant town. Look for the town shoemaker. Knock on his door and stay with him for a while.”

The holy hermit was puzzled by God’s command, but left the next morning. He walked all day across the desert sands. By nightfall he came to the village, found the home of the shoemaker and knocked on the door. A smiling man opened it.

“Are you the town shoemaker?” the hermit asked. “Yes, I am,” the shoemaker answered. He noticed how tired and hungry the hermit looked. “Come in,” he said. “You need something to eat and a place to rest.” The shoemaker called his wife. They prepared a fine meal for the hermit and gave him a good bed to sleep on.

The hermit stayed with the shoemaker and his wife for three days. The hermit asked many questions about their lives. But he didn’t tell them much about himself even though the couple were very curious about his life in the desert. They talked a lot and became good friends.

Then the hermit said goodbye to the shoemaker and his wife. He walked back to his cave wondering why God had sent him to visit the shoemaker.

“What was the shoemaker like?” God asked the hermit when he settled down again in his dark cave.

“He is a simple man,” the hermit began. “He has a wife, and they are going to have a baby. They seem to love each other very much. He has a small shop where he makes shoes. He works hard. They have a simple house. They give money and food to those who have less than they have. He and his wife believe very strongly in you and pray at least once a day. They have many friends. And the shoemaker enjoys telling jokes.”

God listened carefully. “You are a great saint, Anthony,” God said, “and the shoemaker and his wife are great saints, too.” (Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon, *URGINGS OF THE HEART, A SPIRITUALITY OF INTEGRATION*, p. 13-14) So may it be for you – and for me. Amen.