



## Epiphany 6 – Year “A”

### Scriptural References:

Sirach 15: 15-20

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Psalms 119: 1-8

Matthew 5: 21-37

“All In...”

Good Morning, Saints. Thank you so much for being with us today on this 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany. Just 6 short weeks ago we celebrated the visit to Jesus by a strange threesome of Zoroastrian priests from Persia, following some astronomical anomalies, learned calculations, their gut instincts, dead reckoning, and most importantly the Holy Spirit to recognize, honor and gift the Holy One, the Messiah, the Emmanuel... God Among Us... As they

gifted Jesus with the best they had to offer. Today, Jesus “gifts” us back as well with His best: big learnings, strong messages; and radical ethical interpretations. Rocking the cultural and religious traditions of the day and sealing himself historically as social revolutionary, moral teacher, ethical guide and leader of “The Jesus Movement.”

But before we talk about today’s Sacred Stories in detail, let’s talk first about, an odd topic I guess to speak about in church, and that is... poker. And not just any poker but, in my never to be humble opinion, the Queen of All Poker games... Texas Hold ‘Em!

Texas Hold ‘Em is all about community, sharing and and good decision-making. Ironically the exact same qualities that can make us good Christians. If you have never played Texas Hold ‘Em... here is the basic scoop...

Each player is dealt two cards face down... these are called "Hole Cards". Each person's cards are unique and none are alike. Again, much like life deals us our unique and special "hands." Next 5 "Community" cards are dealt face up for all the players to share. So the object of the game is to make the best possible use of the two personal cards we are dealt individually, but also we must play in communion with one another as we all share the community cards together. As with the Jesus Way we walk our spirit journeys both individually and collectively. These Community cards have interesting names... the first 3 cards of the 5 is called The Flop. The next single card... the 4<sup>th</sup> card is called the Turn and the 5<sup>th</sup> and final card is called The River. Betting opportunities are part of each of the community cards turned. Whoever makes the strongest poker hand of utilizing their individual cards and the cards held in community is the winner. When a player feels that

their hand is particularly strong, a common betting technique is to go “all in”. To bet all of ones chips on the next play. A strong commitment and an act of deep faith. “All In”... I am totally committed to the rightness, the correctness, the trajectory of this decision immediately before me.

In today's Gospel, Jesus deals us some pretty hard cards as the Flop, the Turn and Finally the River. The Jewish world had been looking at their “Hole” cards for some time, generations really wondering how things might play out. They have understood the rules and the play up to now... but today... Jesus changes everything.

First, The Flop...

Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

This really changes things... “ups the ante” if you will. Radically changes Moses’ focus in the Ten Commandments and really fine tunes and personalizes what Jesus expects of us as followers of the Jesus Movement. Few among us are murderers... but all of us at one time or another have been angry, have shouted “You Fool” or even something much worse. Who among us has not held a grudge, gossiped, and in private spoke ill or laughed at a brother or sister. By “upping the ante” Jesus is clearly stating his expectations for his followers... gentleness of heart, and openness to both give and receive forgiveness.

Here comes the next card... The Turn.

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

My Goodness... can Jesus be serious about this. Is this the new expectation... the new standard? This “Turn Card” is a hard one to deal with. So let me get

this straight... Jesus expects us to be faithful to our women with our bodies, but also with our minds, our hearts and our spirits. To respect our women, and our covenants with them that much so as not even to think about seeing another woman as a sexual object? The answer to that is yes.

But why these strong standards here? Why now, and why this radical differentiation from the Old Ways to the Jesus Way? The answer for Jesus is simple. One of the main pillars of The Jesus Movement is to re-balance the gross inequalities in power that exist in First Century Jewish Culture and every culture since then where these inequalities continue. Inequalities between societal classes, religious strata, and especially gender inequality. In the first century men held all the power, and Jesus was determined to recalibrate the scale. This is never more evident than the third and last card turned in this game of Texas Hold 'Em... The River.

This card shocked Jewish men to the core then, and even now this statement is the cause of much continued debate within Christianity and the Jesus Movement even today.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

Hmm, this card is truly a game changer...but is this card truly what it seems? Let's have a look...

Like much of the Scripture... written, re-written, sometimes edited, sometimes copied in error... when looking at a critical text like this, the absolute best way to try to discern the original, culturally nuanced message is to go to the original Greek and Aramaic texts. When we do so with this passage, something really interesting happens. The words “causes her to commit adultery” do not appear at all. In the Greek and Aramaic translations the sentence is vastly different, with the functional word not adultery but

“adulterated or altered, changed, diluted weakened.”

The contextual essence is not what we have in our English and Latin translations but a sentence more like... “one who experiences a broken marriage is altered, changed, diluted or weakened.” As is the community altered, changed, diluted or weakened by the dissolution of a family. Again here in this learning, Jesus is recalibrating the scales to rectify the gross societal inequalities for first century women. Under Jewish law, men could divorce their wives for any reason or no reason, simply by petitioning the Elders for a Writ of Divorce. Wives did not have this same benefit. When a woman was divorced, she basically had two societal options. The first pathway was to return to her birth family. This rarely if ever happened, because if the divorced woman was re-welcomed back into her birth family, the “bride price” received by the bride’s family would



have to be repaid in full. As you can probably imagine, families were not in a financial position to return the bride price so most first century divorcees were forced into option 2... prostitution. Many contemporary theologians and scriptural scholars are in agreement that Jesus was firmly against the adulteration, changing, dilution and weakening of the family and marriage covenant by a societal and legal system so stacked against one of the parties so as to render them not only powerless and ritually unclean but relegate them to a lifetime of pain for a decision that they had no part in making.

Relationships based on fairness, equality, respect, dignity and honor... and yes love. Whether the relationship is coming together or coming apart. Jesus has the same requirements, and expects the same conduct.

And so now for us Blessed Ones all of the cards are on the table. We sit looking at our hole cards... the

ones we started the game with. Jesus dealt us the Flop... to release the anger in our hearts... to forgive mightily and often. Next, he dealt us the Turn card... respecting our partners not just with our bodies but with our minds and souls and spirits. And finally, Jesus dealt us the River... relational and societal respect, dignity and honoring our promises as they evolve throughout our lives.

How are we going to play this hand? We have two choices before us. We can fold, and walk away from the hand that has been dealt. It is just too hard or too risky to keep playing. Or we can go "all in," to bet all of ones chips on the next play. A strong commitment, and act of deep faith. "All In"...I am totally committed to the rightness, the correctness, the trajectory of this decision immediately before me.

Our old testament story from Sirach today pretty much sums up our choices...

If you choose, you can keep the commandments,  
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.

He has placed before you fire and water;  
stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.

Before each person are life and death,  
and whichever one chooses will be given.

For great is the wisdom of the Lord;  
he is mighty in power and sees everything;

His eyes are on those who know him,  
and he knows every human action.

He has not commanded anyone to be wicked,  
and he has not given anyone permission to sin.

We get to choose how we want to be in this world... We get to choose how we want to be remembered. We can choose to rise up and accept today's challenges of the Jesus Way. Behavior experts tell us... how we see ourselves is how we act. Basically, "How you view... is how you do!

Our cards are on the table... Are you All In ?