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## Ode to Jimmy Carter

### Matthew 5:21-37

A sermon on the antitheses of Matthew, preached in Duke University Chapel  
on February 16, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Lauren F. Winner

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In the third and fourth centuries, a group of Christians now known as the desert fathers withdrew from the cities of the Roman Empire to the deserts of Syria and Egypt. They withdrew in a posture of renunciation. They were renouncing their possessions, their social status, the prospect of marriage and family. They believed that money and their comfortable houses and their lives of general ease were interfering with their friendship with God. So they renounced all those things and went to the desert to fast and live quietly.

When they got there, they were distressed to find that although they had left the house, the romance, the theater, the retirement plan—though they had left those things back in the city, they were now afflicted by thoughts about them—thoughts about loneliness, thoughts about love, thoughts about safety. They were haunted by memories of the fine meals and beautiful homes they had left in Alexandria, and plagued by thoughts about how their fellow monk in the hut down the road had a better view and a more comfortable mat. The desert monks had escaped the things themselves, but they had not escaped their own imaginations. And so they began to retrain their thoughts.

The pattern these desert monks developed for that retraining boils down to three steps – notice, quarantine, and replace. That is: before you can stop thinking a thought, first you have to notice it. You have to notice that you are indeed stuck in thoughts of anger or lust or envy or gloom. Notice the story you are telling yourself – the story that has come to seem so basic and true that it no longer seems like a story anymore. And then, if you are following the desert people’s pattern, intentionally set the thought aside. Let us say hypothetically that you are thinking some really ticked off thoughts about your mother-in-law who, in her typical self-absorbed way, invited you to dinner at the dead last minute, announced she was making Provençal stew when she knows that you hate olives, and then, when you told her you were staying home to nurse your cold and fever, could not bring herself to say “I hope you feel better,” but rather said “Fine.”

In this purely hypothetical example – you might notice that you are thinking something angry about your mother-in-law, and then having noticed, you might set the thought aside, maybe just for 10 minutes; you might say--“I’m just not going to think that thought right now, I can come back to it in a half hour if I want to, but for right now, I’m walking away from it.”

Notice.

Quarantine.

And then – step 3 – replace the thought with a prayer. Replace the thought with a prayer because the disciplining of our imaginations is not undertaken simply for the sake of discipline. It is for the sake of truer self-knowledge, and of living more in reality instead of living in distraction, and all of that is in turn for the sake of creating space to attend to God.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This account of desert practice draws on, inter alia, Mary Margaret Funk, *Thoughts Matter: The Practice of the Spiritual Life* (Continuum, 1988), especially chapter one.

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“You have heard it said ‘You shall not murder’...But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.”

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

Jesus sounds somewhat extreme here.

What might it mean to take these somewhat extreme words seriously?

What might it mean to take seriously the idea

That your thoughts and emotions matter

And that your thoughts and emotions can themselves partake deeply of sin?

Historical precedent suggests that when you take that notion seriously, you get ridiculed. Hence the title of this sermon, “Ode to Jimmy Carter.”

I was born three weeks before Carter was elected to the White House, so everything I know about the 1976 presidential campaign has come to me as a history lesson:

Carter’s use of the peanut as a way of signaling that he was not a Washington insider  
the key role Carter’s victory in the North Carolina primary played in getting George Wallace out of national politics for good

and of course, Carter’s ill-fated interview with *Playboy* magazine.

When asked, at the tail end of the interview, the umpteenth question about whether his firmly held Baptist religious convictions would unduly influence his policy decisions in the White House, Carter began opining about grace, and about sin, and he quoted this morning’s Gospel reading:

I try not to commit a deliberate sin. I recognize that I'm going to do it anyhow, because I'm human and I'm tempted. And Christ set some almost impossible standards for us. Christ said, 'I tell you that anyone who looks on a woman with lust has in his heart already committed adultery.' I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times. This is something that God recognizes I will do--and I have done it--and God forgives me for it.<sup>2</sup>

Carter had a big lead before this interview, but when choice quotations leaked to the press, even before the interview was published, he dropped 15 points in the polls. Evangelicals and feminists were, for different reasons, horrified that Carter had spoken to *Playboy* in the first place, and everyone else

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in (and illumined by) Susan Wise Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 97-100.

especially Northerners

mocked him for his piety and his lame attempt to sound like he was connecting with the common man by admitting the lust in his heart.

Political cartoonists had a field day.

Instead of making him seem like an average Joe, the governor's comments about lust and adultery actually reinforced people's opinion that Carter was way too pious and way too priggish and took Jesus way too seriously – I mean, really, confessing that you have lustful thoughts as though it were a sin – a serious sin, on par with actually having an affair? Please.

Surely we are not supposed to take these hyperbolic and demanding things Jesus is saying about murder and lust and false witness at face value.

Surely it cannot be that thinking a mean thought about someone is the equivalent of murdering her.

Surely our thoughts--the thoughts we keep to ourselves and never even speak of, much less act on--surely those thoughts are less important than our actions.

And in addition to being less important than actions, surely also thoughts are less controllable than actions: I can prevent myself from sleeping with that woman I met at the conference last week, but I can't reasonably be held responsible for daydreaming about her after I've returned home.

Jesus, and Jimmy Carter – and I pair the two together in the least partisan way possible – Jesus and Jimmy Carter seem to suggest something different.

Underneath the specifics of murder and adultery and bearing false witness, Jesus seems to be suggesting that we are capable of disciplining our thoughts, at least as capable as we are of disciplining our bodies; and Jesus seems to be suggesting that what happens in our thoughts and imaginations matters.

Perhaps today's Gospel passage is inviting each of us to give up a thought. Consider renouncing the angry thoughts about your mother-in-law. Consider renouncing the escapist daydreams about leaving your wife and running off with your next-door neighbor. Consider renouncing the jealous thoughts about your faculty colleague, who seems to have a nicer office than you, and a cozier relationship with your dean. Renounce those thoughts, because Jesus told us that they are the equivalent of murder and adultery. Renounce them to make a different kind of space in your brain for God, for charity, for love, for whatever magical thing you might uncover when you set aside the anger and the lust and the fear.

I don't know how this renouncing will work out for you, but I want you to try it before you toss it aside on the pile we all keep, that pile called “things Jesus says to do but we know no one possibly could.”

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Reading Jesus' words over the last few weeks, it struck me that, at the moment, my crazy destructive thoughts involve not mostly anger or lust, but fear.

Specifically, I find myself having a lot of fearful thoughts about money and savings. I find myself thinking, sort of neurotically, about whether I am saving enough for retirement. I have started reading *Kiplinger's* magazine. I do lots of math, on the backs of envelopes.

I read today's Gospel and I wonder if Jesus, looking down from on high at my late-night envelope scribbling, wants to say something like

Lauren, you have heard it said do not steal, but I say to you every time you think about your retirement account, you have already stolen from your neighbor.

Even just imagining his saying that provokes me to argue back: *saving for retirement is responsible*, I want to say to Jesus. *In this totally uncertain economy, where it's every boat on its own bottom and every retiree for herself, you'd have to be a fool not to worry about your retirement – you'd have to be a fool not to obsessively check your 403b balance every night after the markets close.*

*Why do these thoughts matter, anyway*, I say to Jesus. *I'm just thinking them in the privacy of my own head. What's the harm in making weekly calculations what I need to save if I assume 28 years of retirement, a 7% return, and 3% inflation? What's the harm in indulging a little anger toward my hypothetical mother-in-law with her Provençal stew?*

"You have heard that it was said 'You shall not murder'...But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment."

"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 ... in his heart."

Harsh as Jesus' words about lust and false witness and divorce and anger sound, they are still part of the Sermon on the Mount. They are a small section inside a longer speech he's giving, and that speech is largely about how we love God and love one another.

In that context, it seems that Jesus is reminding us that the thoughts we have are part and parcel of our loving or not-loving.

Truth to tell, I'm terrified to stop obsessing about my retirement account. I fear that if I relax my vigilance I will somehow slacken off and then I will die cold and alone and unable to take care of myself.

Why do thoughts matter?

My retirement thoughts matter because at their core, they are about isolation. The more I obsess about my savings, the more I isolate myself – and scarcify – and pull myself away from my neighbors.

The thoughts about my 403(b) are really just ciphers for another thought: that I am alone, and there will be no one to take care of me.

Those thoughts – those alone thoughts, those isolate-from-my-neighbors thoughts – those thoughts are the antithesis of Christianity.

They are the antithesis of Christianity, because in the Christian faith we love one another and we have brothers and sisters and we don't isolate ourselves – for Christians, the kind of isolation that follows from my retirement thinking is frankly just not allowed.

The hardest thing about Jesus' words in today's passage is not that they set a high standard, or that they feel moralistic.

The hardest thing about these words is that they are simple – so simple as to feel threatening and strange. The hardest thing about them is that they are mysterious.

Jesus is telling us that not just our good deeds but even our thoughts somehow contribute to the Kingdom of God.

To think a loving thought is to bring about the Kingdom of God, and to think an angry thought is not.

This seems mysterious to me –  
It seems as mysterious as God coming to earth  
It seems as mysterious as God turning water into wine  
And healing lepers  
And feeding the 5,000  
It seems as mysterious as God feeding us  
And making us his body  
And giving us his peace.

Amen.