Every morning, first thing, I walk my dog. We typically cross Transit Road to go to the little park that is on a side street on the other side of Transit Road. One day last week, my dog and I walked to the corner, pushed the walk light and waited for our turn to cross. When the walk light came on, we proceeded across the street – the dog prancing along in front of me with her tail wagging and me half asleep holding onto the leash behind her. All of a sudden I heard the sound of tires squeeling and looked up to see a car that had started turning into the intersection, oblivious of us crossing until it finally stopped about two feet away from hitting us. Waking up quickly, I yelled at the driver, “Hey, you fool.”

Precisely, of course, the words Jesus says we ought not to say to others – precisely those words that put us in danger of eternal punishment.

Once again, in this passage, as in many of those we’ve been reading the past few weeks that are part of what we call the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus raises the bar for how we should behave. Jesus links merely getting sexually excited when we see an attractive person with the sin of adultery; he links divorce and remarriage with adultery and he links anger with murder. So, it isn’t enough just to avoid cheating on your spouse or actually avoid killing someone. We must keep our eyes away from attractive people and never get angry with others or call them demeaning names.

Of course, none of us can keep these new commandments as Jesus has interpreted them here. Jesus gives us a vision of an ideal world – a new kingdom where we all get along and are all perfect, but we know that kingdom isn’t quite here yet. We don’t all get along all the time. Marriages, which are made up of two human beings, aren’t always perfect. Sometimes we just can’t make our marriages work, whether through faults of our own or through fault of our spouse. Sometimes we can’t help but admire a beautiful woman or a sexy man. Sometimes we get just plain mad at other people and we may even stay mad for a little while. God knows that we are human beings who sometimes make bad choices, who sometimes sin. So, for now, God calls us to do the best we can and to rely on the grace of God, which is greater than all our sins.

Those of us who have become angry with others, but never killed anyone or who have fantasized about attractive people, but have never committed adultery might chafe at Jesus’s words that label us a murderers and adulterers. But Jesus is looking at the heart and not just the action. If thoughts that can lead to the action become part of us, Jesus says the damage is done.

Some of us may enjoy mystery books or whodunit shows. One premise that seems to be true in mysteries is that even seemingly civil, quiet, “good people”, given the right set of circumstances, can murder. In fact, G.K. Chesterton put these words into his character Fr. Brown, a Catholic priest who solves murders in his spare time. Brown uses these words in describing his method of detection. “You see it was I who killed these people.” Brown means these words in the sense that to figure out who the murderer was, Brown had to look within himself to find the mentality that would cause someone to commit the crime. And Brown, did in fact find that same mentality to murder within himself.

We all are human and we all hold within us the capacity to do bad things. Anger can fester and cause us to kill, either physically or emotionally (through slandering someone so badly that we take away their soul.) Anger can kill us as well – in the form of ulcers or heart attacks or any number of diseases that are triggered by worry or stress. Anger can break up marriages; anger can split churches. Likewise, if we spend too much time looking at forbidden fruit – at that younger, fitter body than our spouse now has – we can fail to be grateful for the spouse that we have – we can become lured into trouble.

In a perfect kingdom, such as the one Jesus is building, anger, jealousy, ingratitude, broken promises and desiring of things we cannot have cease to exist. But Jesus also knows that the kingdom isn’t totally here yet – as long as there’s human nature. God created us with free choice and, as long as we have that, we will sometimes make bad choices.

That’s why Jesus died. Jesus sacrificed himself so that we wouldn’t have to face the eternal penalty of sin. Jesus describes for us an ideal and asks that we give it our best shot. But when we fall short of the target, Jesus saves us.

Amen