Years ago, when I lived in Nashville I noticed that almost everyone who worked in the service industry did not really work in the service industry but instead were just biding their time until their big break came in the country music business. How did I know this? Well, because they would pretty much tell you that right after they took your drink order. Now I don’t want to paint with too broad of brush but when you have just heard from your agent that you have an audition to play Calico Jack at the Pirate’s Voyage Dinner Show at Dollywood remembering that I wanted onion rings instead of fries may not be your top priority. It’s hard to do one job when you are convinced that you are destined for something much more important. And this is obviously not just a problem in Nashville, but rather one that seems fairly endemic in our country. People don’t seem to want to their job, but rather a different one altogether. I mean if you watched the Oscars the other day you got a lecture from the Joker about artificial cow insemination (honestly). To continue on with our country music theme this morning as Hank Williams once said, “Why don't you mind your own business. Cause if you mind your business, then you won't be mindin' mine.”

I bring this up today because Jesus gives us one of the great mind your own business speeches in the Gospels. It takes place in the context of the Sermon on the Mount and says things like the following, “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.” He goes on to talk about topics like adultery, divorce and swearing, but the overriding topic is to first get your own stuff in order. Don’t think you get off the hook because you have not actually murdered someone; rather realize that your anger is a problem. Work on the basics of your own behavior before you start telling other people about the problems in their lives. In other words – do your job. Or as Jesus says later in Matthew, “First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” Telling ourselves to shape up is not as fun or easy as telling other people to shape up, but that is what Jesus asks of us. Now I realize that if we ceased telling other people that they are wrong most of the content of the internet might disappear, but its what Jesus said so let’s take a little time and delve into it.

There is something funny that you hear from time to time about Jesus, and by funny I mean wrong. It generally comes in a narrative which posits that Jesus is kind of the good cop of the Trinity who just wants us to try and love each other unlike the mean God of the Old Testament is way too judge-y. In this telling following Jesus will be like the summer of love, just with fewer hallucinogens and more bathing. But is that really the case? I mean today Jesus seems to not just be enforcing the Old Testament law but making it a lot more severe – it’s not just murder that’s the problem but anger in general and not just adultery but lust. Jesus is asking us not just to look good on the outside but on the inside as well.

One of the things that I have noticed as far as trends go in Christianity is that we have taken an outward focused Christianity to be the norm. What I mean by that is Christian leaders not only spend a lot of time making pronouncements about how the world is supposed to be run, but tend to more concerned with the outward and visible actions, rather than the internal dispositions of our heart. That is they worry a lot about murder but not too much about anger. At the church office we have somehow gotten on the email list of a Christian organization that sends us weekly updates. And in these updates you never see anything about an inward focus – there are no call for repentance or purity but it is always about something political. The last one we got was on voter registration and the one before that was on drinking water. Now we can have debates about how much the church should be in the world, but what we cannot do is use this outward focus as a way to ignore the work we need to do in ourselves. We cannot live out our faith strictly on the outside, making sure that we look okay and chastising people who we think don’t look so okay. And if you think this is another one of my weird ideas like developing a Fresno-themed casino in Las Vegas let me give it to you from Jesus’ mouth. In Matthew when Jesus begins his ministry he does not say let’s talk about what losers the Romans are. No, instead he says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” It is all very personally focused. He does not tell us that he has come to establish a political party or get involved in political activism, instead he begins the whole thing by telling us that we need to repent, we need to change the stuff that is in us that is not glorifying to God.

There are lots of theories about why the church has been shrinking since the 1950’s. And I certainly do not have a great answer, but I think one of the things that we could do that might help is to return to first principles. If Jesus started out his ministry with a cry to repent it might be useful for the Church to also start at that place. To be a place where we try, with God’s grace to get better. And honestly if we start there, I am not sure if we will ever leave. For unless you are a lot better than me, there is always something in me that is not right. Sure I have never shot and killed anyone but as Jesus tells us this morning, that is not enough. Rather we are not to be angry with our brother or sister. Put me on the freeway and I am usually angry with both my brother and my sister within a few moments, especially if they think tailgating me will somehow make the car in front of me go faster. There is so much for me to work on, that I am not sure I have time to tell the rest of the world how it needs to fix itself.

Jesus’ message in so many ways is deeply personal; it was about us fixing the stuff that keeps us separated from God. Ultimately he cared so much about this that he gave his life for it. He gave his life to break down the barrier that separates us from being in communion with God. Certainly the response to Jesus’ message this morning might be that Christianity sounds really hard. And yes it might be. It is not a religion that gives us a quick fix but rather calls on us to do the hard work. The fundamental reason why we are Christian or why we come to church in the first place should really be that we are striving to be holy. And being holy requires us to take the things in us that are in rebellion against God and change them. Jesus calls us not just to avoid shooting people but rather calls us to rid ourselves of any desire to hate the things that God loves. We are to avoid anything that tears at the fabric of God’s good creation. Our virtue and holiness cannot be lived out in others, but rather is our primary job. A job that is probably going to take a while but one that will one day make us God’s own both now and forevermore.