I think this gospel is disturbing to many of us. I also think that this is just the response Jesus is shooting for. For he saw more clearly than anyone how life is to be lived if we are to have the best life possible here, and in the life to come. So, at times, he spoke in ways that were intended to shake people out of their complacency, and push them to rethink important things about their lives. And he certainly did this in his Sermon on the Mount – part of which we heard today.

Because these words of Jesus are so disturbing some have argued that he is speaking in hyperbole here. In other words, some would say that Jesus is exaggerating to make a point when he says that anyone who is angry with another and calls them an idiot will be liable to judgment, or anyone who looks at another with lust in his or her heart will be thrown into Gehenna. But it seems to me that this watering down of the strength of Jesus’ words doesn’t do justice to them. I think they are to be taken just as they are. After all, they were important enough for him to speak in his first great sermon – a sermon which was intended to set forth those truths that would serve as the foundation for his entire ministry. So it doesn’t seem likely to me that he was intending to speak in ambiguous terms.

I think the key to understanding this whole passage is found in the pronouncement, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” These words were no doubt stunning to many who heard them because the scribes and Pharisees were generally considered to be the most righteous of all people. But clearly, Jesus thought that they weren’t righteous enough! Why? Well, if we read through the
gospels, Jesus spells this out pretty clearly. His problem with the scribes and Pharisees was that while they cared immensely about following all the rules for holy living that they had adopted over the years, they didn’t seem to care all that much about what those rules were intended to promote. In other words, they lived as though the rules were an end in themselves, so that one’s faithfulness in observing the rules was the proof of one’s righteousness. But what Jesus tried to help his people see in so many ways was that these rules had been given to promote healthy relationships – to make life better for everyone. So one’s own keeping of the rules didn’t matter much if there was no real concern for others.

Maybe these three little vignettes will help illustrate the point Jesus was making. First, think of a family, a family in which all the children have chores to do each week – doing dishes, taking out the garbage, vacuuming, and the like. And they’re all fairly good about doing these chores exactly as they are assigned. If their job is to do the dishes after dinner, they will usually do them without complaint. But would they pick up a dirty dish, rinse it off and put it in the dishwasher at any other time? Not in your life.

The children do what the house rules require of them. And their parents are grateful for this. But their parents also challenge them to do more. Why? Because they know that there is more to being a family than living by the rules. The rules aren’t what makes a family. A family has more to do with relationships than with rules. And so the parents tell their children that when they see a dirty dish lying around they should rinse it off and put it in the dishwasher, even if it isn’t their job, simply because they are part of the family and they know this will be of help to their brother or sister, or to them. The parents try to help their children see that it is only
when they move beyond the rules to really caring about one another that they truly will be a family.

Now the second vignette: Following a Mass in which the priest preached a stirring homily on how we should love one another and treat one another with profound respect, many people make a mad dash to the parking lot during the closing hymn, “They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love” -- pushing their way through fellow parishioners without even acknowledging their presence. Once in their cars, they hurry to pull out before someone blocks them in. And when someone dares to cut in front of them, or impedes their speedy exit in some way, the driver exclaims “What an idiot!”

Some of those who stayed to exchange greetings and well wishes with fellow parishioners observe the mayhem in the parking lot and say, “What did these people come to Mass for anyway? Didn’t they hear the scriptures and the homily?” Watching this, the priest just shakes his head and asks himself, “What can I do to help them see that the life we are all aspiring to is one in which everyone lives in love, in holy communion? Well, I guess I could start by not calling other drivers idiots when I’m behind the wheel!”

The third vignette I’d like to share, is inspired by World Marriage Day today and Valentine’s Day, which we will celebrate this Tuesday – don’t forget! The story goes like this: when the mother of four gets up on Valentine’s Day and gets her children off to school, she can’t help remembering the excitement of going to school on Valentine’s Day when she was a child. She remembers going to school with the cards she had made for each one of her classmates. She remembers the box with the slit on top that she took to collect the Valentines
given to her. She remembers how much she hoped that she would get a special Valentine from a certain boy in her class because it meant that he really liked her.

And then she begins to think of the young man who once gave her the most beautiful Valentine she had ever received and how he had eventually become her husband. With pain she thinks of how a great distance has grown between them over the years, how her husband no longer speaks loving words to her, how he no longer holds her hand or kisses her goodbye. She thinks of how he continues to do all that is required of him as a husband – fixing things around the house, managing their retirement account, attending the children’s games with her, and going to family gatherings. But she knows that he had stopped trying to deepen the bond between them long ago, or even to tend to it at all. And so she dreads the card and candy that she knows her husband will give her when he gets home from work because she knows that it is just the fulfilling of an obligation rather than the expression of a love shared. So when he comes through the door and presents her the obligatory card and candy, and before he can bolt for his den, she swallows hard and says, “Honey, can we talk?”

This is what Jesus is speaking about in the gospel today. Sure, it’s a good thing to do the good things that are expected of us. But God wants more from us than this because God wants more for us than this. When we look at another human being, God doesn’t want us to see a law that must be fulfilled or a rule of etiquette that must be observed. Rather, God wants us to see someone beautiful, someone precious, someone to be treasured, and to be treated accordingly.

After all, we can observe all the rules and still think that someone is an idiot for not driving as we thing they should. We can observe all the rules and still look upon someone as a
sex object rather than as a person. We can observe all the obligations of marriage and still look upon our spouse as a burden rather than a beloved partner. But when we do such things, we have traded what is most real, most lovely, most precious, for something that has been boxed, branded, and used according to certain formulas. We have traded relationships for rules. And in the end this leaves us cold.

What Jesus calls us to in the gospel today is to learn to love and to cherish one another with our entire being, because that’s when life is full and rich and exciting. Does this sound extreme? Sure it does. And this is where it leads – to extreme happiness.