

6th Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)

Matthew 5:21-37

'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; 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. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

'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. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

'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.

'Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord." But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

I grew up in the Bible Belt. And, thus, many of my friends were members of churches where the sermons were, as it is sometimes called, all "fire and brimstone." Most of the sermons were severe indictments on the total depravity of the world and of our sinful nature. Among the many prohibitions that were often flung relentlessly from the pulpit were things such as the consumption of alcohol, being homosexual, participating in gambling, or - perhaps worst of all - being a Democrat.

When it came time for today's passage from Matthew to be preached from the pulpit of these fire and brimstone churches, it was like Christmas morning for the preachers. You could see it in their eyes. They got all excited. They would reach the pulpit already in a frenzy, and would begin spouting off the different prohibitions in today's passage:

Don't murder - you'll be judged! Don't be angry with a brother or sister - you'll be judged! Don't insult a brother or sister - you'll be judged! If you call someone "a fool" - it's to the hell of fire for you! Don't even *think* about looking at a woman with lust - you'll go to hell! Don't you even *think* about divorce

or of marrying a divorced woman because *that's* a one-way ticket to Satan's playground! And, of course, don't you dare swear! You know where *that* will lead!

By the time the preacher was finished with this list, he was sure to be in a sweaty state, feverishly wiping his forehead with his handkerchief while frantically motioning his arms like those wacky waving inflatable arm-flailing tube men at the local car dealership.

As the token liberal among my Bible-belt friends, I would often roll my eyes at such sermons. Some of the things, of course, I did not disagree with. Murder is wrong, I agree. Being angry with a fellow brother or sister is not the best place to be, I agree. I agreed with the fact that the way I looked at women who I found sexually attractive could, if left to their own devices, lead me to treat them as sexual objects to be had instead of human beings to be respected. There were many good things to be considered in this passage.

However, other topics of such sermons I disagreed with. I had never understood homosexuality to be a sin. Having grown up in a family where alcohol was consumed responsibly in moderation, I never understood many preachers obsession with prohibiting it. I always thought that such sermons that obsessed with these "evils" were merely opportunities for the preacher to puff up his chest and enjoy the power of yelling at a group of scared people.

So, when I heard passages like today's passage from Matthew, I would often roll my eyes. I would flip through the pages of the Bible until I found a passage that wasn't quite so "intense." I, being the good liberal theologian that I was, would dismiss today's passage as an example something that was the context of the time and had little to tell me today. After all, Jesus couldn't *possibly* want me to gouge my eye out after looking lustfully at a woman! I don't know of a lot of people who would have eyes if that condition were fully met!

But now we have before us two extremes. On the one hand, we get ourselves so incredibly worked up like the fire and brimstone preacher that we take today's passage so seriously that we forget the true heart of Jesus' message. Or, on the other hand, we roll our eyes and dismiss is completely.

Both extremes, I believe, are perhaps equally dangerous.

Therefore, let us together seek some middle ground regarding today's passage.

This passage from Matthew's gospel is a continuation of what is commonly referred to as the "Sermon on the Mount." It comes immediately after last week's passage in which Jesus tells us that we are the light of the world and that we should not lose our "saltiness."

Jesus covers four topics in today's text: anger, adultery, divorce, and the taking of oaths.¹ Instead of spending time on all four, I would like to focus on the first topic: anger and brokenness between our fellow brother or sister.

Once again, here are the words Jesus speaks in today's passage on the subject:

¹ With much thanks to Prof. Marcia Y. Riggs for her exposition on this text in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*.

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Today's passage is an example of Jesus expanding upon a law given in the Old Testament. For example, the Old Testament says, "You shall not murder." Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount, chooses to take this opportunity to back up and examine what causes murder to happen in the first place: anger.

First, let us talk about anger and then we'll talk about what Jesus tells us to do with it.

As I have mentioned before from this pulpit, anger is almost always a secondary emotion. What I mean by this is that anger is usually an emotion that is caused by another: fear. 99 times out of 100, if someone is angry, it is because they are scared of something. When a brother or sister in the faith gets angry with one another, it is probably because one (or both) of them feels threatened by something the other is or is not doing. Perhaps the status quo is being challenged. Perhaps expectations are being changed. Perhaps one is threatening the wellbeing of the other. Perhaps both have been taught to fear one another by a third party. Whatever the reason, fear causes anger which creates divides.

Unfortunately, too often it is our human tendency to not deal with anger. Anger is scary. It causes us to lose our rationality and our sense of logic and reason. Therefore, we tend to run away from that which we don't understand. However, Jesus suggests that anger be dealt with and not left to fester. In fact, Jesus goes so far as to suggest that anger between two people can cause a barrier to the act of worship. Before you bring your gift to the altar, become reconciled with your brother or sister, he says.

Friends, this is a good time to remember that the "passing of the peace," that ritual we do immediately after the confession sequence, is not just a chance to say "hi" to the person you haven't seen all week. It is, first and foremost, an opportunity to share the peace of Christ with one another and to forgive one another for the many wrongs that we have done to one another.

But this ritual need not, and should not, be restricted to the holy space of this sanctuary. There are many other holy places where peace and forgiveness need to be heard. Perhaps reconciliation is waiting to be had by the water cooler, or the classroom, or the town board meeting. Perhaps the passing of the peace is needing to be had at a Presbytery meeting or in the post office or the library. We live on a small island where we, quite literally, bump into one another quite frequently. The opportunities for passing the peace and forgiving one another abound!

Now, we must remember, that making amends with one another does not mean that we will all agree or see eye to eye. Reconciling with our brother or sister does not mean that we do so at the expense of the higher needs of justice and righteousness. This is not an empty exercise of holding hands and smiling so that we feel better about one another. This is about the intentional work of bringing issues to surface in order that we might work together for the common good.

So, friends, above all, remember that our actions have consequences. Remember that living as a faith community is seldom easy. There is so much at stake. Otherwise, Jesus would not have spoken of

these issues in such dramatic and intense terms. Remember that you have a crucial part in the work of reconciliation that we are called to do. Know that you have been called to extend the peace of Christ to those who need it most, whether it is a long-time friend, a long-time enemy, or the homeless person or the undocumented immigrant who has ICE agents knocking at their door. The peace and reconciliation of Christ is brought into fruition by disciples like you and me who take a stand to grow into our identity as the Beloved Community.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.