

Year – A, Epiphany 6
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By Thomas L. Truby
Matthew 5:21-37

Who Won?

A video appeared on my Facebook page this week. A woman opens her car door and absent mindedly bangs into the car next to her. Another woman sitting in that car demands an apology but she demands it in an angry, superior tone. The first woman takes exception to the second woman's tone and in retaliation smashes her door into the second woman's car a second time. At this point the second woman smashes her door into the first woman's car five times and with all her strength. The first woman, determined not to lose this battle, backs her car in such a way that she scrapes the entire side of the second woman's car. The second woman, her face turning dark and with a look of focus and determination rams the first woman's car. And so it goes. Their mimetic entanglement escalates until each woman's car is totally destroyed. In the last scene, as one disabled car, blowing black smoke, creeps toward the other, also crawling toward it, both women's faces are totally focused on the other and each is contorted with hatred and rage. Both women are in a mood for murder. The camera pans to the bumper sticker on one of the cars that reads "war is not the answer."

Jesus said, "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." What is happening with these two women?

Anger tips us off that we have become mimetically entangled. We have locked horns and each of us wants to win. Winning has become more important than whatever it was that started it. While we feel our adversary is the opposite of us and full of evil, we are both acting just alike. In truth we are imitating each other. This is what I mean by mimetically entangled.

Jesus illustrates the entanglement by showing how it quickly increases in intensity; first there is anger with a brother or sister, then we insult our brother or sister, and then the intensity culminates in the accusation that the other is "a fool". Does this not parallel the two women?

When we call the other person "a fool" they go into a reactive rage that leads to a "hell of fire." To call someone "a fool" is to say, "Go away. I see no value in you. You are nothing to me." It is the ultimate affront.

As a young man I was in a clinical pastoral education program in Lincoln, Nebraska. I did not get along well with Brian, one of my chaplain colleagues, who I experienced as haughty and superior. In the presence of our Chaplain Supervisor I confronted Brian and he replied that he wasn't going to deal with this and with his nose in the air began walking out of the room. In an instant my body filled with adrenaline, my shoulders squared and I was ready to take him to the floor. He would not walk out on me! To my ear Brian had called me a fool and I responded with a "hell of fire." Our supervisor quickly intervened.

It doesn't have to go this way. I could have chosen to respond non-violently but I hadn't learned to discipline my impulses. I indulged them and allowed them to control me. I allowed myself to become angrily entangled with my chaplain colleague.

Jesus knows we can control these things if we choose to, particularly if we ask him to help us. Our feeling of anger gives us information but does not justify an explosion. We can take the information and choose how we will respond. If we are followers of Jesus and allow Jesus to be between ourselves and the other who at that moment is causing us to see red, it changes the whole constellation. With Jesus in the midst of it even our own anger will be subverted and

harnessed for good. If we are living in Christ, he will be part of that relationship, that marriage, that work situation that threatens to entangle us. That's what our chaplain supervisor did. Like Jesus, he placed himself between Brian and me and with his help we worked it out.

I use prayer that way. When I get really angry, sometimes I remember to pray to God for myself and for the person with whom I am angry. It helps.

In any case it is a human "hell of a fire" that gets going and not a threat that God puts on us to make us behave. I used to think this verse meant God would send me to hell if I got angry. That was a bad interpretation of scripture that only made me depressed and explosive.

Jesus offers a route of escape. The first move involves "remembering" the brother or sister that has something against you. It's not "remembering" that you have something against them but that they have something against you. Did you get that? They have something against you.

Does this mean that we can't say, "Well, it is their problem; they need to make the next move, the ball is in their court?" I think it does and I am not sure I like that. It sounds like Jesus thinks I should move toward those people who think I have hurt them. If they think I have hurt them and I know that I haven't why should I go to them? This reconciliation business is hard work. Jesus doesn't seem to offer any excuses for leaving a relationship unresolved.

Could it be that reconciling with our brother or sister is our gift to God? On the basis of these verses I'm thinking reconciliation means letting go of anger. I am thinking it means abandoning our mimetic entanglements, crucifying our desire to have the last word, giving up the idea of winning at any cost, ceasing to insist on being apologized to, and relinquishing the necessity of being declared the victor.

Does this make sense? Angry entanglements leave us mired in "stickiness". We can't stop thinking about the one we are "stuck to" and our thoughts are dark and make us feel worse but we still do it. Lord, help us!

We say, "I can't let this go! They are the problem and I have to stand-up for myself. Justice and what's right are involved here." And so we plough on. We take it to the next level. Jesus anticipates this line of thought and constructs his response. "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." If you don't let go of this angry entanglement, it is only going to get worse. It will escalate and you may find yourself completely out of control.

Nip it in the bud! Don't let it become a monster and take on a life of its own.

To make sure we recognize the danger of refusing to let go of angry entanglements Jesus ends with one final sentence. "Truly I tell you, you will never get out (of prison) until you have paid the last penny." Angry entanglements can get very expensive. Consider the lawyer's fees; the cost of the divorce, the fortunes lost when families fight. Consider the loss of life in war. These things even happen in churches. Paul writes, "For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?"

In our Facebook video either of the women could have stopped at any point. But the more entangled they became the harder it was to stop. This is why Jesus said "come to terms quickly with your accuser" before you get in too deep.

And with Jesus, reconciliation does not depend on our neighbor's response. Our brother or sister can accept it or refuse it. That's their choice but we can let it go from our end. Sometimes to "reconcile" we have to do what feels to us like "let them win." Better they win than we lose the peace of our souls. Could that be a form of forgiveness? Could forgiveness take the form of choosing to let them win? Did Jesus model this on the cross and were we the ones who won? Who won? Could it be we all did?