

**Year A, 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Epiphany**

**February 12, 2017**

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**Matthew 5:21-26**

### **Escalation!**

Steve Bannon, special advisor to our president, believes war is inevitable. Cultures have always struggled with how to keep the peace but few have succeeded for long. The threat of internal strife and external conflict has worried humanity from the beginning and from the beginning people have agreed on rules they hoped would help. How do you keep things stable and working so that people don't start taking the law into their own hands and killing each other?

Matthew's Jesus was commenting on this when he said, "You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, *Don't commit murder*, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment." The people believed Moses wrote those rules but murder hadn't stopped. It didn't seem to be enough to bring peace.

So in line two Jesus, Matthew's new Moses, has more to say. "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment." Danger of judgment! Let's clear up something right now. The judgment here is not God zapping you either in the present or in the afterlife. We have gotten used to reading it that way but that throws us off. No, the danger of judgment is a way of saying that there is likely to be human consequences for committing murder both foreseen and unforeseen.

Would you agree that Jesus' revision of the ancient rule adds something? Let's put them side by side. "Don't commit murder, and all who commit murder will be in danger of Judgment." "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment." They are in different categories. Murder is an act. Anger is an emotion, a feeling that comes over you; if severe enough it makes you want to kill somebody but the other person doesn't necessary have to die.

I remember a project where everyone was supposedly working together but tensions had developed. The leader of this project whispered a question in my ear, "Is it alright to kill somebody in church?" she asked. I replied, "Yes, under certain circumstances."

I don't have to explain that do I. I knew she was using the language of anger and my response told her it was all right to be angry, in fact, sometimes you can't help it. By whispering that she was angry and me responding with humor, we reduced the danger of her anger for everyone. The danger of judgment was greatly diminished because she now was much less likely to say something hurtful or get an ulcer. That's a good thing.

My example forces me to see this is going to get real tricky. The issue is what do you do with your anger so that it doesn't have dangerous consequences? If you interpret Jesus as saying you shouldn't be angry and being angry is always bad, you wind up with mental health issues and repressed groups of people who feel powerless and thwarted in their human potential.

That's what African-Americans, Hispanics, women and minorities of all kinds have been told forever by dominant culture. Don't be angry and express it, you are disturbing our peace.

Jesus also must have realized how tricky this discussion of anger and its relationship to murder becomes because he quickly moves to examples to illustrate his point. His examples carry us much deeper. Example one, "If they (the angry person) say to their brother or sister, 'You idiot,' they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council." Notice the condemnation doesn't come from God; it's from the local authorities. Maybe it's your parents if you are still in the original nest shared by siblings or maybe it's the legal system if you are an adult and you are drunk and they charge you with disorderly conduct. It's just not smart to say "You idiot," even though you may be thinking it.

What might be some other alternatives to "You idiot?" You could say, "I think we see it quite differently, help me understand how you see it." Or, if you want to give more information about yourself, you could say "I think we are coming from a different place. I am coming from having grown up in Nebraska on a farm in a protestant family who attended the smallest church in our primarily German and therefore Lutheran and Catholic town in the 50's and 60's where my thinking formed in a particular way." Knowing these things about me can really help you understanding why I think the way I do. With this knowledge perhaps I don't seem like such an idiot.

Let's say I am talking to my friend Sam Robertson, a cultural and ethnic Sioux from South Dakota who is also a follower of Jesus. He views history in a very different way than I do. I am the great-grandson of Caucasian pioneers who saw ownership of land as the road out of being White Trash. When an opportunity rose to acquire nearly free land from the government, my ancestors jumped at it and it did bring them into the middle class. They didn't care nor think about how the government took that land from Native Americans. But history is seen differently if you are Sioux and know where that land came from. Now Sam doesn't want the land back or even retribution but he would like full acknowledgement of the truth of what happened in history and he wants us to view his ancestors with as much human dignity as we hold our own pioneer ancestors. Can you see how many possibilities for dialogue and learning I lose if I call him an idiot?

Let's move up to the next level of intensity with Jesus' second example. In my attempt to win in my battle with my neighbor I tell him he is a fool. By calling him an idiot I suggest his thinking isn't up to snuff but when I call him a fool I suggest he's hopeless. There is something basically wrong with him, not just his thinking but him. He should be ashamed of himself for existing on this earth.

Can you see how calling someone a fool is even more inflaming, making it even harder to keep things from bursting into a fiery hell. Again, hell is not in the hereafter, it's in the right now as in "things went to hell." Humans have always struggled to keep things from going to hell. Hell is conflict and chaos where everything goes out of control and we can't help but hurt each other, even those we don't want to hurt. These are the kinds of things best nipped in the bud

by refraining from calling the other a name that the other finds intolerable. This is why you just don't refer to African Americans by using the "n" word, not ever, not even in your mind.

So if we don't want to commit murder either by ourselves or through our proxies, we need to stop it early when it is only anger. Manage and control anger up front and you control murder down the road. Jesus' ethic has the foresight to see the root cause of murder long before it gets to that.

The new and improved Moses that Matthew sees in Jesus starts at an earlier point in the escalation that leads to violence. He starts by ruling out undisciplined anger. In Matthew, Jesus says "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift." Reconciliation is more important than worship. Reconciliation makes for peace. Jesus wants peace more than he wants worship.

Did you notice that it doesn't say "If you have something against your brother or sister you leave and go to them?" No, they have something against you and you know it. They think you are the problem. You may think they are the problem but don't use that as an excuse in refraining from going to them. It's so easy to say "well, it's their problem."

You may have to sacrifice your own conviction of being right to make that move but you were on your way to the altar of sacrifice anyway. It's better to sacrifice your own pride than go on with worship where you reassure yourself of your own righteousness.

Verse 25 reads "Be sure to make friends quickly with your opponents while you are with them on the way to court. Otherwise, they will haul you before the judge, the judge will turn you over to the officer of the court, and you will be thrown into prison." Translated, do whatever you can to achieve reconciliation before things go too far. At least you are still in control because you are managing yourself. But if you don't do that, you will lose control, external forces will take over, and you find yourself in jail. How many feuding families discover this truth and wish they could go back and this time keep things from getting so intense. Everything would have turned out so differently.

Up until now we have kept this conversation focused on family and domestic relations but the same applies to relations between countries. Control the rhetoric of anger, show respect for your neighbor, listens to your neighbor's point of view before speaking and it will go a long way toward controlling the escalation of tensions and the prevention of war. Angry and impulsive speech fans the flame of human rivalry the consequences of which usually exceed human expectations. This is why Matthew records Jesus as saying "I say to you in all seriousness that you won't get out of there (prison) until you've paid the very last penny." You get angry. Your pride gets involved. You get into a fight, it escalates, you are drawn in ever deeper and it costs you way more than you would have ever imagined. The costs from the war in Iraq and Afghanistan are still coming in as disability and medical expenses for our veterans.

I want to end by reading the first two verses of our gospel lesson from Matthew a second time. “You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, don’t commit murder, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment.”

“I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life—so that you and your descendants well live.” Deuteronomy 30:19b Amen.