

Epiphany 6 A 2020
Matthew 5:21-37

It is no secret that the idea of civility has taken a beating these days. Even if I leave the news off, I am subject to the newspaper headlines and the general incredulity with which people ask me, "Did you hear about what he said yesterday? Did you see what they did yesterday?" Most of the time I don't have to ask who these people are referring to, because it's part of my job to stay abreast of what's happening in the world and our part of it, but frankly there are times when I have to say, "This is ridiculous". I noticed the same phenomenon when I was in England last summer in the wake of the stalemate on Brexit. People talk about how the norms of civility are re-negotiated every generation or two, but I don't ever recall it being this bad. When I am in Philadelphia, people appear intent on knocking me over at the PATCO and SEPTA stations, are often brusque to the point of rudeness unless I am buying something-- and this in the City of Brotherly Love.

Kelly, by contrast, works in a college run by the sisters of St. Joseph, a Roman Catholic order committed to the idea of restorative justice and reconciliation. All disputes between students and faculty are handled in a manner that is focused on dialogue and dignity, where all can feel that their voices are heard in way that matters. I'm lucky to have this example of what our interactions should look like, even in an atmosphere of distrust and acrimony that is all around us these days.

Today we are hearing today's gospel in the shadow of the words we should have heard several weeks ago; the Feast of the Presentation preempted the gospel we typically hear from the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God... Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy... Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." The beatitudes are a primer on what the kingdom of God looks like, and it is up to us to be the hands and feet of this enfleshed God in the world. It's only in the context of that love that today's verses make any sense, because, as disciples, we have to respect boundaries, especially in the context of restorative justice and reconciliation. If we are listening carefully, we hear the words of Jesus coming from a place of mutual respect, because there is no room in this new world for part-time discipleship. Today we hear about what will happen if we dare to be incensed by all of what we know, and what will happen if we take all this teaching seriously, that we are not allowed to be angry, even at the peril of our souls. We cannot look too long at the pretty girl or the handsome guy across the room who has caught our eye; we cannot even offer an oath about any of it. Any reasonable adult would conclude that it all seems unfair, that Discipleship 101 is something that none of us should have opted for, no matter what the consequences of dropping it.

But that is what this morning is about, these consequences of stepping beyond the boundaries of discipleship, and whatever we hear in them must be heard through the filter of our own blessedness. We are blessed beyond belief, so much so that we are receiving these words not from a God-up-there but a God right here, in front of us, telling us not only that we matter but that we are holy, in spite of all we hear from bosses and colleagues, maybe even those in our own house. In the scheme of God's plans for the world, we could not matter more. But if we matter, then what we do matters; discipleship is a full-time engagement, and there is no time off for good behavior.

It is interesting to hear the biblical literalists on this passage, or it must be, because I have never heard one. It may be because the hell that we feel in our anger could be as real as anything we dream could happen to us, as it is often one we create for ourselves in our own heads. Garrett Keizer, a writer and former priest in Vermont, talks about how our endless exposure to images from technology seems inescapable, where we see a murderer thousands of miles away that triggers our own anger at the world, which means our world, our neighborhoods, our streets. To be angry at a brother

without cause then becomes remarkably easy, because we begin to see that person in so many of the people around us. The judgment we pronounce on that person is one we feel ourselves, because he is a fellow child of God, and we are as liable to him as we are to ourselves.

Stumbling in this way is remarkably simple, but there are still easier ways to do it. I believe it happens for all of us when we talk about our priorities, how much we value the dignity of every human being and then ignore the most vulnerable and their needs, whether they are guests in our midst on Sundays or the children in our lives who so desperately need our support. It is because when we hear this morning about the danger of members being lopped off as judgment against us, it has to be clear to us that we are all members of one another and that when we ignore the most vulnerable among us, the rest of us cannot help but be deeply harmed.

In all this discussion about the boundaries of discipleship, it is helpful to remember that there is another kind of anger, one that actually serves a purpose, and it has to do with the righteousness that we heard about only a few weeks ago. Keizer talks of his father as a retired telephone worker, one who had a “college man's job without a college degree,” with whom Keizer once took a car ride as a boy. Once out, they saw a ring of men standing around a hole and Keizer's father immediately got out to see what the commotion was. It was night, and Keizer soon lost sight of him; when he returned, he was clearly angry. “They've got this one poor guy working down in the hole and all these supervisors up on top telling him what to do. He didn't need somebody to tell him what to do; he needed somebody to *show* him. So that's what I did. I got down in that hole and I showed him. The two of us had the problem taken care of in two minutes”. When they pull out of their parking spot, Keizer's father looks down at his dirty knuckles and says, “I used to work with these hands, you know”.

The truth is that we all work with our hands. After we finish hearing Jesus and get up off the ground, out of the classroom he has set up for us, we have to step out and use what we have just heard, both the blessings and the boundaries, to help form this world. Most of all, we need to show the world, our own world, what it means to be a disciple, not as an academic exercise but in all the corners and holes of our lives, because it is my bet that it is there we will find the living Christ. Jesus not only tells his followers what discipleship is like; he is ready to show them, something we will all witness in a few short weeks. What our discipleship looks like will have to do with what we do with our anger, how we treat each other, all our members. Because, however clear the boundaries and the consequences, we are blessed beyond measure and it is that learning, the hands-on learning that dirties all our knuckles, that we so desperately need.