

The Deeper Goodness: On Anger and Truthfulness

Matthew 5:21-24, 33-37

The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy said that we can't believe in the Nicene Creed *and* the Sermon on the Mount. The one makes Jesus the object of belief, devoid of his life and teaching—both the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed jumping from “born of the virgin Mary” to “suffered under Pontius Pilate”—while the Sermon on the Mount is a call to a radical new way of living following the path of Jesus, his life and teachings.

The Sermon on the Mount is a call to a deeper goodness and truer righteousness. Jesus moves from the letter of the law to the spirit; he gets to the heart of it all. Today we look at his teachings on anger and truthfulness. If these aren't issues we struggle with daily I don't know what are.

Jesus is a surgeon of the soul, our souls, here, but he works in love for our healing and wholeness.

I

First Jesus takes up murder and anger. It may feel like open heart surgery, but healing is on the way.

“You’ve heard it said in the ancient teachings”, he said, “‘You shall not murder’, but I say to you if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement.” So, he goes on, “If you call someone *Raca* (the Aramaic for “feather-brained”, or “air-head”) or *Mora*, or moron, or stupid”, you are in spiritual trouble. We hear worse names all the time.

Then he adds, “When you are at the altar offering your gift and remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar; go be reconciled, then come back and offer your gift.”

I’ve never had the nerve to read that passage before the offering on Sundays. The place would empty and the service over before you came back! But it’s what the Hebrew prophets said over and over: the worship of God and how you treat others are of one piece.

In the Jewish tradition in the Ten Days of Awe between Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, one is to look at one’s life and confess your sins to God, but as for your wrongs against others, you are to go to them directly and make peace. That work is ours. Jesus may have had something like this in mind.

In his teaching on anger Jesus goes straight to the heart, where our thoughts and feelings arise. In Louise Penny's "Three Pines" murder mysteries, Inspector Gamache says the murder always starts out in emotion. Anger, Jesus says, can be murderous without committing murder. Anger kills more than the body, it can kill the spirit. And the giver and receiver of anger are both harmed.

Writing about anger, Frederick Buechner says:

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past...to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.¹

Well, that as the saying goes, is a mouthful. If anger is fun and revenge sweet, it is also a deadly feast.

At this point we may say with the disciples after another of his teachings, "Why, Lord, this is impossible." And Jesus says to us and to them: "Exactly, but what is impossible for you is possible with God." You might say the whole Sermon on the Mount is "the impossible possibility", impossible for us, but possible with God. I've named this whole series, "A Field Manual for Befuddled Followers of

Jesus.” More than once in the Sermon on the Mount, we scratch our heads.

“How’s this possible?”

When we think about anger it is helpful to look at the physiology of anger: the pulse quickens, the blood sugar rises, anti-coagulants decrease. Anger is nature’s defense package getting you ready for fight or flight. But if we keep revving up the anger it hurts the body. Blood platelets thicken so that if injured, the blood will clot more quickly. Doctors call them “sticky platelets.” If we keep revving up the anger, heart disease may be on the way. So the next time you are starting to get angry ask: “Is this worth sticky platelets?”

There are many kinds of anger: powder-keg anger, crock-pot anger. Passive aggressive anger, when you act it out in less direct ways; There’s the anger you turn on yourselves which can cause depression and self-harm.

The Bible talks about “righteous anger”, anger that helps us oppose what is wrong and separate ourselves from it, but that’s another sermon!

Resentment is a storehouse of anger. Literally it means “to feel all over again”. It allows you to feel over and over again the pain over what someone has said or done to you. Let it go. Empty the storehouse. Let it go. It does you no good.

There are moments we have over-sized anger, an excess of anger disproportional to what has happened. When that happens it is a call to self-examination. Why am I feeling this out-sized anger? For me, I feel it most when I think my integrity is being questioned or attacked—even when that is not what is happening.

The technique of contemplative prayer is helpful when anger or other negative emotions come. First, let them flow on in. Trying to block them makes them grow stronger. Secondly, let them flow by and flow out. They are like a barge on the river floating by. Don't jump on the barge! Let it flow on by.

Paul, following Jesus, writes, "Be angry but sin not!" The anger is not the sin. What you do with it is. Then Paul adds, "Don't let the sun set on your anger." Be ready to say you're sorry. As far as it is possible, let the day of the injury and anger be the day of reconciliation.

III

Now to the issue of truthfulness. It's a daily struggle. Some live by the mash-up of two Bible verses from Leviticus and Psalms:

"Lying is an abomination unto the Lord, but a very present help in time of trouble!"

The issue at hand was the taking of oaths. The ancient teaching was “You shall not swear falsely”, but Jesus says, “No swearing at all.” Growing up in the South I heard people avoiding swearing by saying “I swan!” That’s a little like saying, “Gosh, darn!”

But Jesus is talking more deeply about the truthfulness of speech and a trustworthiness of life. It’s a great compliment to say, “They are as good as their word.” Tammy Wynette’s hit song was “Stand by Your Man.” Jesus is saying “Stand by your words.”

In Jesus’ day, people would avoid swearing by God’s name by swearing by lesser things: I swear by heaven, or the throne of God, or by Jerusalem, or by the hairs of one’s head.

We’ve heard people say, “I swear on my mother’s grave”, or “I swear on a hundred Bibles.” Jesus says, “Don’t swear at all.” Doesn’t swearing oaths imply you might not be so honest other times?

The only oath we hear much today is the oath taken in court—” to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth”—with our hand on a Bible.

Early Anabaptists would not testify in court because they, following Jesus, would not take an oath.

Today, instead of oaths we say things like, “Did you get that in writing?”, or “You can take that to the bank.”

Lying is most of the time an attempt at self-protection. When we lie, often we have already lied to ourselves. Jesus says that lying is a serious spiritual issue.

He boils it down at the end by saying, “Let your yes be yes and your no be no.” Plain speech, honest speech, reliable speech, speech you can count on.

These words were so important that they were repeated in other places in the gospels, the New Testament and early Christian writings—as in *James*:

Above all, my beloved, do not swear by heaven or earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no. (James 5:12).

It all begins with the heart, Jesus keeps saying, which is why in scripture there is often a prayer for the cleansing of the heart. These teachings are not easy, are they? So we call upon a power greater than ourselves.

In the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, there is an opening prayer recommended for Sunday worship, every Sunday worship:

Almighty God

unto whom all hearts are open,

all desires known

and from whom no secrets are hid,

cleanse the thought of our hearts
by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit
that we may perfectly love thee
and worthily magnify thy Holy Name

That would be good prayer to start every day. There's a verse from the Psalms
sometimes used before the sermon in some churches:

Let the words of my mouth
and the meditations of my heart
be acceptable in thy sight
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

That's another good morning prayer.

We cannot live the Sermon on the Mount by our own willpower or
goodness, only by the help of the One who made us and loves us completely.

Amen

1. Frederick Buechner, "Anger", *Wishful Thinking* (N.Y. Harper & Row, 1973), 2.

