**February 16, 2020**

**Matthew 5:21-37**

Frederick Buechner wrote, “Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongues the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, 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 for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

It’s true. There is something bone-rattling about anger. It is one of the oldest emotions humans have. The physiological reaction begins in our caveman-era brains and flares out like a frilled neck lizard, flashing colors in our minds and warning others to step away. Anger dances on the edge of our danger zone. If it gets out of hand, anger leads us to harm ourselves and others; we find ourselves cursing when we wouldn’t normally, in some long drawn-out court case when we would have preferred to settle things between ourselves, and even murder when we have really lost our minds (and hearts).

It matters. It matters to God what we do and how we treat others. It matters how we handle ourselves on our best and worst days. It matters when we call someone a “fool” (or worse!). It matters how we honor our covenants and vows. It matters how we look at and judge and think about strangers passing us by – whether we are giving them an internal dog-whistle or an audible intended insult or compliment. It matters.

As Jesus said, “you have heard it said…” You have heard the Old Testament law. You have heard the Ten Commandments. But that’s not enough. It doesn’t go deep enough. The call here is not to abandon the law of the prophets (remember in verse 17 when Jesus said, “I didn’t come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.”). Jesus asked us to follow the law into deeper relationality. Follow the law into more honorable relationships. Follow the law into kinder, gentler, grace-filled relationships.

Martin Luther and other theologians believed that the chief value of the law is to show us *our* need for grace. That’s different from what you might expect theologians to say about God’s law. They didn’t say that God’s law is valuable because it fixes us or encourages us to compete against one another for the position of “most righteous”. No. They said that the chief value of the law is to show *us* our need for grace. The law shows us the ways that we go astray. God’s law shows us our brokenness. The law shows us how much we need God.

And the verses in Deuteronomy show us how much God desires us to know God and follow God. God was and is after our hearts. God wants love and life for us, for all of God’s creation, so God gave the people the law (through Moses). God gave them *words to live by* so their community could flourish. Like any good parent, God gave structure so there could be life and love. … But over time, the rules given in love became disconnected from that love. And the people’s hearts became disconnected too. And the laws became less about life for all and more about life as it had to be done. … Jesus knew those laws in Deuteronomy. And he knew they were given in love for love and he wanted his disciples to know that, too. The disciples had to learn the deeper intent behind the law.

What we feel, what we hold in our hearts matters. The thoughts and desires we carry around inside matters to God, and *should* matter to those who want to be Christ’s disciples. Jesus said that we can’t ignore the darkness in our hearts… Because what’s in our heart makes us who we are. And it will come out in what we do. And Jesus wanted his disciples to hold and share the love of God. Jesus didn’t want disciples who just followed the rules (he could have found that in the scribes and Pharisees). He didn’t want disciples who just showed external acts of faith without holding love and faith on the inside. He wanted disciples with heart, who would live with their hearts and lead with their hearts.

Anne Lamott wrote, “I *know* the world is loved by God, as are all of its people, but it is much easier to believe that god hates or disapproves of or punishes the same people I do… I’ve known for years that resentments don’t hurt the person we resent, but that they do hurt and even sometimes kill *us*… I’ve been asking myself, am I willing to try to give up a bit of this hatred?” [[1]](#footnote-1)

The #metoo and #blacklivesmatter movements are meant to draw our collective hearts’ attention to that of people who have been the recipient of angry words and violent actions. Regardless of how you feel about the social campaigns, it is our responsibility as Christians to deal lovingly with everyone we meet – black or white, men or women, rich or poor. It is our privilege to love one another and be held accountable when we don’t.

As I sat with John Wallace’s family last week, I heard them share the joys of life at Sweet Hollow: the deep friendships they made, the significant life events they shared, and plenty of mishaps experienced in these walls. But I also heard them talk about difficult relationships and painful conversations from decades ago. Things our church members said to John or another family member have stuck with them these 30 and 40 years later. Chances are, the hurtful things said then were not planned or well thought out. Chances are, those were untamed tongues temper-driven. But however thoughtless or unintentional it was in the moment, and however unaware the speaker might be of its impact *now*, those angry words are still packing a punch today. Sometimes I think that we excuse our bad behavior when it happens at home – with friends or family instead of with strangers in public. When actually, our friends and family and everyday communities are just as needy and deserving of our Christian law-abiding and heart-loving words and actions.

The angry words that we collect and the resentment that we harbor in our hearts has no place here. Our hearts are made for better things. Our hearts are made for love. Our hearts are made for peace. So Jesus calls the disciples to seek reconciliation. Don’t go to church if you have a broken relationship. Don’t even try to atone for your sin; don’t make a sacrifice for the wrong you’ve done; instead, go to the person that you hurt and ask forgiveness directly from them. Go deeper into the law. Go deeper into loving one another. For as we do, we will find ourselves deeper in the heart of God. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

1. Anne Lamott. *Plan B*, pp. 220-221. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)