

***BEFORE YOU LEAVE FOR CHURCH...***

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**University Congregational Church**

**Reading: Matthew 5: 21-26 (NRSV)**

**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; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first to be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 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 in prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.**

A young girl who was writing a paper for school came to her father and asked, "Dad, what is the difference between anger and exasperation?" The father replied, "It is mostly a matter of degree. Let me show you what I mean." With that the father went to the telephone and dialed a number at random. To the man who answered the phone, he said, "Hello, is Melvin there?"

The man answered, "There is no one living here named Melvin. Why don't you learn to look up numbers before you dial them?"

"See," said the father to his daughter. "That man was not a bit happy with our call. He was probably very busy with something and we annoyed him. Now watch...." The father dialed the number again. "Hello, is Melvin there?" asked the father.

"Now look here!" came the heated reply. "You just called this number and I told you that there is no Melvin here! You've got a lot of nerve calling again!" The receiver slammed down hard.

The father turned to his daughter and said, "You see, that was anger. Now I'll show you what exasperation means." He dialed the same number, and when a violent voice roared, "Hello!" the father calmly said, "Hello, this is Melvin. Have there been any calls for me?"

There certainly seems to be plenty of things going on in the world to make us angry. Stocks are falling, the housing market keeps declining and foreclosures keep mounting, people are losing their jobs, and many essential services such as education and fire protection are losing budget support. The last thing we need is some idiot calling us on the phone with a prank call, or a survey, or a product to sell. It does not seem to matter one bit that you tell them, "I'm not interested," "No thank you," "We don't disclose financial information over the phone," or "We're eating dinner, please call another time." They don't get it. They keep right on

talking, reading from their scripted pitch. Finally you hang up on them and mutter your way back to the dining room table. And if you are like me, they always know when you are eating dinner, whether it is at 5:30, 6:00, or 7:30. You can even mix up the times and they still know.

What makes us angry on a deeper existential level is the betrayal of friends or family. I have a friend whose aunt had two fillies stolen from her corral, along with 13 bags of feed. It turns out that the thief was the granddaughter of the people who helped maintain the ranch. She was caught in Oklahoma. The sheriff said to her, “You know what we used to do with horse thieves, don’t you? Well, I got the rope in my car. Problem is we haven’t got a tree.”

What a disappointment for the girl’s grandparents and her employer. She was often around the place. Everybody knew her and knew how much she loved those horses. No one ever imagined that she would do such a thing.

Worse yet was the phone call that came in the middle of the night, begging the minister to call on a family. The father was desperate. The minister went to the home. The neighborhood was flooded with emergency lights from police cars and ambulance. The family was

numbered by the news that their son was arrested for the rape and murder of the woman next door.

Our hearts are broken, aggrieved, and vexed over the lack of judgment, foolishness, greed, and vanity of others. And if the truth be told, the same can be said for each and every one of us. We are flawed and our character is blemished and there are check marks by our name or at least question marks. As a result our souls are burdened with anger, grief, and resentment.

In the reading from Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that we cannot approach the altar of God with such animosity in our hearts. We cannot approach the throne of God with hatred on our minds, retribution wrapped about our fists, blind rage in our vision. We cannot get God and get even with our neighbors at the same time.

In fact, suggests the Messiah, we must be reconciled with those from whom we are alienated before we leave for church on Sunday morning. We must make peace with our brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors, cohorts and competitors before we enter the house of God. Before you go to church on Sunday morning restore harmony in your fractured relationships.

It does not matter that you teach Sunday school, sing in the choir, or serve as an usher or on the Board of Trustees. It does not matter if you are a charter member, make an annual contribution to the operating budget, or fund the youth group's annual mission trip. If we are angry and resentful of anyone we have no standing before God.

In fact, suggests Jesus, we need to seek out that person and offer reconciliation. We are required to offer them a peaceful resolution of our antipathy. The restoration of harmony in our relationships is essential if we are to approach the love of God. Do it, said Jesus, before anger becomes litigation.

Now this is not new material that Jesus is offering. We heard it from the prophet Micah:

With what shall I come before the Lord,  
 And bow myself before God on high?  
 Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
 With calves a year old?  
 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
 With ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
 Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
 The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
 He has told you, O mortal, what is good:  
 And what does the Lord require of you  
 But to do justice, and to love kindness,  
 And to walk humbly with your God? (6: 6-8)

All that God has ever wanted is for human beings to be reconciled with one another. All God has ever wanted is for us to be at peace with our

brothers and sisters, friends, and neighbors. The Holy expectation is that of justice and kindness. Our worship means nothing until our hearts reflect grace for one another. It is that simple.

Now each and every one of us knows in our hearts who it is that we need to be reconciled with; who it is we need to call up and invite to lunch; who it is we need to write a letter to. Some times that person sits down with us at the dinner table. Some times that person works with us. We need to bite the bullet and risk reconciliation if our relationship with God means anything at all.

Now if you are in denial, or cannot remember just exactly who you are mad at, let me help you out. Who is it that you are having mental arguments with? You know, the person you are chewing out long after the confrontation is over – maybe years after the fight? Who is it that jangles your nerves when they call the house or you find their return address on an envelope? Who is it that you are still trying to get even with? Who is it that you have something to prove to? Who do you need to convince?

But here is a more difficult proposition. What if the person you are angry with is beyond your reach? What if they are dead? What if they have moved far away and you have no way of getting in touch with them?

Perhaps they are now in advanced stages of Alzheimer's and would not know you from Adam? I am talking about the people who hurt you so long ago. Perhaps they physically or sexually abused you. Maybe they abandoned you. Maybe they treated you unfairly in a social or employment relationship. Perhaps you lost a job or advancement because of some skullduggery on their part. And what if in any of these situations there is no real possibility of reconciliation?

Matthew does not help us at this point. The scenario that Jesus set up was one of two alienated people of sufficient social proximity that they could reasonably come to peace with one another. But when that is not possible what do we do with the anger? The fact is that hostility continues to burden our souls. Our indignant wrath, especially one we have had a lifetime stroking, remains a barrier between God and ourselves. Bitterness continues to build a wall between creature and Creator. That fury also contaminates our relationships with other people. I cannot tell you the number of people who are angry with me because they once had another minister or priest who hurt them deeply. I often meet people who resent me because I remind them of a father or uncle or husband that abused or neglected them. The simple truth is anger distorts every relationship we have or would hope to have!

So how are we reconciled in the midst of deep emotional malevolence with persons we can no longer be reconciled with? They are not available for the process of restoration. Psychotherapy is one option. Garrison Keillor might suggest a thick slice of rhubarb pie. I would like to suggest that the Christian thing to do is a Buddhist thing to do.

One of the central tenants of Buddhism is the doctrine of non-duality. That is to say, there is no real distinction between you and me. All of us carry traits and characteristics of one another. In fact, most of us are most put off by or uncomfortable with the people who are most like us. We cannot admit that they remind us so much of ourselves. That suggests to me that I share common traits with the people I am most frustrated with or offended by. I have to admit that their corrupt nature is very much like my own. I confess that part of my anger is not only with their behavior but the temptation of my own soul to commit the same acts.

I mean to suggest that reconciliation, whether with the living or the dead, begins with the embrace of non-duality, the oneness of all things. We have to open our hearts to our own fallible traits as much as we do with those we are angry with. In Buddhist psychology the real question is not about that other skunk we take such offense to, but coming to accept our own stink. What our neighbor did to us reveals a point of

vulnerability in our own minds that reacts with anger and defensiveness. There can be no healing if we cannot stanch and mend our own wounds. Reconciliation begins when we see the other in ourselves and vice-versa. Reconciliation begins when we embrace not only the humanity of our enemy, but our own humanity with his or hers. We have to forgive not only what someone has done to us, but what we have done to ourselves or allowed them to do to us. We can also confess that we have nurtured that anger, worn it on our sleeve either for identity or sympathy, and the fact that feeling sorry for ourselves has its own rewards.

With true reconciliation restoration of the human community is possible. Let me tell you a Zen story. The Zen master, Bankei, would offer weeks of secluded meditation. Students from all over Japan would travel to his monastery to sit zazen with him. During one of these sessions a student was caught stealing. The matter was brought to Bankei's attention and members of the community demanded that he be expelled. Bankei refused to expel the thief.

A short time later the same student was caught stealing again. Bankei refused to expel the student. The other monks and novices wrote a petition asking for the dismissal of the thief. They went so far as to state that they would leave the monastery if the thief were not thrown out.

Bankei read the petition and summoned everyone before him. He said to them, “You are wise brothers. You know what is right and what is wrong. You may go somewhere else to study if you wish, but this poor brother does not even know right from wrong. Who will teach him if I do not? I am going to keep him here even if all of the rest of you leave.”

The wayward student began to weep copiously. All desire to steal was removed from his heart.<sup>1</sup>

Reconciliation is the hard work of being a Christian and of being a Christian congregation. We are all sufficiently human that we need forgiveness for ourselves and for others. We are all sufficiently wounded and alienated that we could never possibly know the love of God without restoration with one another. May this week be a movement toward restoration in the broken relationships we have created and have suffered. Maybe it will be just one small step toward wholeness with someone we have been angry with for a long time. Maybe it will begin with the acceptance of our common humanity. My prayer is that we extend ourselves to those from whom we are alienated before we leave for church next Sunday.

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Feldman and Jack Kornfield, editors, *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 228.