

Reconciliation Matthew 5:21-26

*“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** 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 into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have **paid the last penny.**”*

In this passage, Jesus gives hard words.-- He has a knack for doing that.-- It is really too bad that we cannot rewrite passages to be more affirming of the natural, Western inclination to want the spiritual life to primarily be about a vertical relationship with the human and God. Instead, Jesus tells us that this God/human relationship is not primary; that is, it is not the starting place. God is always the third with two people and undergirds the relationship, but if we injure another in some way, it is not God that must go to them. God is not there to justify our wrongdoings. We must. The starting place is not between the individual and God:

The starting place is very much in this world of relationships.

The starting place is with the person beside you.

The starting place is with our fellow people, most importantly those that are difficult to love.

We need to make a fundamental shift toward seeing our relationship with God more as a spiderweb, with many connections that includes every living thing, every tree and sparrow, each individual person, from the smallest speck of dust to the largest planet, to the universe itself. We are all in this together: you, me, and the universe. We are all--all of existence—on a grand journey of transformation.

Let us meditate upon the instructions that Jesus gives in this Gospel reading:

Leave your gift and **go**: What is the gift that you think you are giving to God? While we might not think of our gift as something on the altar, I believe that we all have traits or activities that we believe make us closer to God. Some people think that they can buy God with money, that by tithing God will bless them. Some people think that their own spiritual growth is a gift to God, that it pleases God. These are both secondary activities. Giving of our financial resources, be it to the church or charity, is worthwhile; and growing spiritually is part of our human life that God placed a drive for in our hearts, but if we are cheating our neighbors, everything we do “for God” is really a mask to hide our sins against neighbor. Take this for example: a group of businesspeople who gather one night a week for fellowship with people in the same industry. Some of these businesspeople pay their workers a living-wage and offer health insurance. Others simply pay the minimum-wage and do not offer health insurance. Both groups pray together, engage in Bible study, and in general each group appears the same, or at least the bark of the tree looks the same, but as Jesus said, “ye shall know them by their fruits.” Which group needs to leave their gift on the altar? God is against those people who treat their workers unfairly. All of their spiritual work that they do is nothing....**unless** it shows them that they need to make amends. Otherwise, it is merely subjective hooey. One of the basic problems of the world is that people in power, people who commit injustices, can read the Exodus story and think themselves the Israelites. We—you and me—we are not immune to that tendency. We must keep vigilant lest we find ourselves the unjust businessperson who meditates and goes on prayer retreats but refuses the basic command of “love thy neighbor as thyself” by refusing to provide just wages.

Jesus continues:

First be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

We can look at this in a literal fashion, going and being reconciled with one person, but I believe the more challenging message that Jesus is giving us here, today in our lives, is to work for reconciliation on a wider scale (but of course, starting at home is required—reconciliation on a personal

and social level are both two sides of the same coin). If we must first be reconciled and then offer our gift, it seems that our gift **is the act of reconciliation itself.**

Here I have in mind the reconciliation of the injustice in society that is the opposite of loving my neighbor as myself. For those of us who are not oppressed, have healthcare, a house, clean water and healthy food, we can choose to ignore the pain of the world. But God is intimately connected to the world in a way that makes the world's pain, God's pain. God takes the pain into God's own being. We can today choose to either be open to the pain of the world or pretend like it does not exist; our hearts can be open to be hurt by the pain and cries of others, or they can be cold and Stoic. Let us here from Lucretius, who was a Roman Epicurean poet, on the opposite of Christian engagement and reconciliation in the world:

'Tis sweet, when, down the mighty main, the winds
Roll up its waste of waters, from the land
To watch another's labouring anguish far,
Not that we joyously delight that man
Should thus be smitten, but because 'tis sweet
To mark what evils we ourselves be spared;
'Tis sweet, again, to view the mighty strife
Of armies embattled yonder o'er the plains,
Ourselves no sharers in the peril; but naught
There is more goodly than to hold the high
Serene plateaus, well fortified by the wise,
When thou may'st look below on other men
And see them ev'rywhere wand'ring, all dispersed
In their lone seeking for the road of life.

Not caring about wars we aren't involved in, not caring about another's anguish: these are all too common human traits, but this is not the kind of outlook that Christ wishes for. Not caring is the opposite of reconciliation; **to be agents of reconciliation we must first be concerned about the world, we must work toward loving the world that God sustains.** We must choose to either be an instrument of God's love and reconciliation in the world OR we can choose to be indifferent to the suffering of others, indifferent to wars that do not affect us, indifferent to unjust laws that do not target us, indifferent to the sick who lack the basic human right to healthcare (by the way, even if you don't agree that government is the answer to the healthcare disparity, it does not somehow absolve you from working toward loving your neighbor as yourself). People have a fit when the price of gas goes up, but people can sleep well at night knowing that countries torture political prisoners. Oscar Romero once said: "To try to preach without referring to the history one preaches in is not to preach the gospel. Many would like a preaching so spiritualized that it leaves sinners unbothered and does not term idolaters those who kneel before money and power. A preaching that says nothing about the sinful environment in which the gospel is reflected upon is not the gospel."

So ladies and gentlemen here today at Church of the Covenant, let us not think that the gospel is separate from what we read in the newspaper; nor let us think that the gospel is separate from actions. And finally, Jesus said:

*Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have **paid the last penny.***

Injustice has **CONSEQUENCES.** It creates a debt. Reconciliation is how those debts are paid. As Jesus said, we will never get out of the prisons we have made until we pay the last penny. We may never be able to do this until this universe is transformed by God, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. Reconciliation only comes from love. God commands love—the only true source of reconciliation. You can't have perfect reconciliation without love, and God wants a universe of perfect reconciliation. A universe of perfect love. It will happen. The question is, are we going to get on at the ground floor?

Let us go from here today knowing that when we work for reconciliation, be it with a family

member, or with a group that our society has marginalized, or with people opposite of our political persuasion, and maybe most importantly those who differ in their understanding of Christianity—let us go forth with the conviction that 1) reconciliation is **our** task 2) it starts with us and 3) the World **CAN BE** transformed.