

“Inside-Out Righteousness”

Matthew 5:17, 21-26

My mother was someone who kept her letters, in a beautiful brass box covered with Chinese dragons on her desk. In an age of electronic communications, keeping old letters might seem a bit archaic, but it does allow one to revisit the truly cherished expressions of love, esteem and encouragement, without which life would be unbearable.

One of the letters Mom kept in her box was written by me when I was a boy of eight. It is a very short letter with a mixed message. I wrote it the day I ran away from home.

I no longer remember the exact cause of my decision to run away: perhaps I felt unfairly treated in a home of six people where I was the youngest. Perhaps my feelings got hurt by something that was said or done—or not done. The letter itself contains only two sentences, with a valediction:

“Gone.

Be back in morning.

Love and Hate,

Clinton”

I no longer remember the cause of my condition, but I do remember, vividly, packing my bag and running across Harvard Ave. to the playground behind the Swarthmore Presbyterian Church, where I took refuge in the little wood playhouse as evening fell. Time passed, and my anger cooled. It was growing cold outside, and when the headlights of a police car slowly cruising the parking lot stopped to rest upon that playhouse, I was certain I would be discovered and taken to jail. The police finally drove off, and I took the opportunity to scoot back home, using the back door to sneak up the back stairs and jump into my bed. Over breakfast the next morning, nothing at all was mentioned about my misadventure, but Mom gently served me my breakfast. And she kept that letter to the day she died.

I

Our subject today is anger—and not just the combustible kind that blazes up like road rage on Hwy. 41, only to cool off when people come to their senses; but the settled, inveterate anger that, over time, can stiffen our character and darken the mirror with which our souls reflect the image of God.

After the grace of the eight Beatitudes; and after naming us Salt of the Earth and Light of the World, Jesus' sermon begins in earnest as he addresses the moral content of the Gospel in light

of the ethical content of God's laws: laws which he stated he had come "not to abolish but make full."

"You have heard that it was said," says Jesus—six times, to be exact, with six teachings that address not only three of the Ten Commandments—the ones covering murder, adultery and oath-breaking—but also the laws of divorce, retribution (or "an eye for an eye") and culminating with the command to love our enemies and pray for them. These are extraordinary teachings which "move the conversation" from outward obedience to inward consecration, or as Skye Jethani put it: "inside-out righteousness."

In our culture, we often hear people say, "Well, I didn't break any laws" when justifying their immoral or unethical behavior. Jesus' sermon changes all that. He's not interested in the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, any more than he cares about our own outward conformities. Jesus is addressing our hearts, the seat of our will, the source and decision-point of our actions—whether they be loving or hateful, good or bad. That is where our real battle with sin is won—or lost. It's also the part of us where grace is given, the Spirit bears fruit, and our faith becomes genuine.

II

"You have heard that it was said to those in ancient times, 'You shall not murder,'" says Jesus, quoting the Sixth Commandment.

“But I say to you”—notice this bold and extraordinary claim of authority! “But I say to you...” not “thus saith the Lord,” with which the Old Testament prophets prefaced their oracles. “But I say to you” reveals Jesus’ own self-awareness and acceptance of the mantle of his Messiahship. This is no mere prophet, proclaiming God’s words: this is the Lord’s Anointed, bringing God’s kingdom into the world. “But I say to you” reveals Jesus’ self-identification with the Father. God’s laws will find their fulfillment in his words because he will bring them to pass on earth.

“But I say to you,” says Jesus, “But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you say, ‘You loser!’ you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You stupid jerk!’ you will be in danger of hellfire.”

This is stern stuff! Stern because Jesus understands fully the connection of our inward, spiritual condition to our outward actions and behavior. What makes two men jump out of their vehicles at a red light and pull out guns on each other? Anger does. The kind called “thymos” in New Testament Greek, “thymos” which blazes up like dry straw—but burns out just as fast.

But the term which Jesus uses in his Sermon is “orge,” which means not a sudden combustion but the slow swelling and

inflammation that leads to inveterate anger, contempt, and the disposition to condemn, punish—even to destroy. Jesus is speaking about the kind of anger that, if left unaddressed, can become toxic, insinuating itself into every aspect of our lives.

Skye Jethani addresses this in his book saying,

Anger is the posture of the heart that leads to murder...it is the seed of sin that must be removed within us...Maybe you don't fly off the handle or rage...a calm demeanor, however, is not necessarily evidence that your heart is right.

Two expressions Jesus employs in our passage are “Raca,” which means “idiot” or “loser,” and “More,” from which we get the words, “moron” and “morality.” It means essentially, “You stupid jerk!” Jesus is sternly warning us that it is in our social relationships, when we label others with contempt, dismissal and condemnation that we are in danger of “Gehenna”—the fires of hell.

Does this mean that God will send us to hell for being angry? By no means. Anger—justified or not—is a natural and human response to life as we experience it. We get angry when we are hurt, in pain, deprived or disappointed, when we experience unfairness or injustice, or when we behold the cruelties and injustices of others. Even God is described in Scripture as capable of anger: righteous anger in light of our faithlessness and sin.

No—God isn't angrily sending us to hell for being angry. Our own anger can send us down that path, you see, beginning with our labeling of others in order to diminish their inherent worth as human beings created in God's image or to justify our hellish treatment of them.

III

What then do we do with the anger we feel? Do we just pile it into a corner of our minds, like burning leaves in our backyard, smoking and smoldering away?

Here are three suggestions.

#1) Change the Conversation.

The one you are having with yourself. How much time are you giving to going over and over all your grievances? Are you having any fun with that? Getting angry may be human. Staying angry is a choice. Try changing the "litany of resentment" that gets recited all day long in your head by taking a bike ride, going out for a walk, reading a good book or baking a pie! Count your blessings—not your grievances. "Count them one by one..."

#2) Reconcile your Relationships.

Don't ignore the issues. Jesus tells us explicitly to address the causes of anger "with our brother or sister" because Jesus is

ultimately concerned about our life together: in our marriages, family and community. Issues will arise—they always do. Paul says in Ephesians 4:26, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.” In all my premarital counseling sessions, I urge couples to commit to doing just that: “Don’t go to bed angry.” Work it through. And if things aren’t conducive—find a time when they will be, soon! As James 1:19 says, “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, because your anger does not work the righteousness of God.”

Yet some issues in the web of human relationships aren’t so easily resolved. Like working relationships. Or when relationships like marriage fail altogether. Now something more is needed: someone greater than ourselves. Which brings me to my third suggestion:

#3) “Take it to the Lord in Prayer.”

(tell two stories: “The Boss from Hell” and “The Hairdresser’s Husband”)

Conclusion

You know, every single one of us here or listening in today has something in common with that little boy who ran away from home: our hearts can carry both love and hate—sometimes

toward the same people and at the very same time. And sometimes, that person is our self.

So take a lesson from an eight-year-old:

-Don't let the sun go down on your anger: it will only leave you shivering, miserable, hidden and alone.

-Head on home before it gets dark: the doors on God's house are always open—front and back.

-Lie down, and in the morning, sit down at God's table and get something to eat.

Because in the end, Love is always more nourishing than Hate. And the Lord (like my mom) is keeping all your letters—angry or otherwise—with a love that will last forever.

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First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest

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