

**February 5, 2017**

**TEXT: Matthew 5:21–26**

**TITLE: Words from the Mount – Ripples of Anger**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Sermons are funny things. You pick out a passage, and in the course of studying it, you are led to other passages until before long you find yourself in a whole different place than where you started from. For three Sundays, Pastor Heather and I are going to explore sections of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The verses I just read from Matthew 5 are ostensibly about the dangers of anger. But like tree roots spreading out below ground or vines growing up and covering a large, rock retaining wall, the ripples from this passage spread out from the topic of anger to touch on a host of other important biblical themes that involve every one of us, especially today.

Six times in a row Jesus used the phrases "You have heard it said...but I say to you." For example, he began with "thou shalt not kill" and said, "If you murder someone, you'll be liable to judgment." Then he moved on with "But I say to you, if you are angry with someone, if you insult them or call them a fool, you are liable to the same judgment, even the flames of hell." Now he's got our attention. Murder is, thankfully, a fairly rare crime. But getting angry or calling someone a fool—well, that's something we're all guilty of.

There are two types of anger—a righteous anger in the face of injustice and evil, and then all the rest. Jesus was angry when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and saw the merchants and moneychangers buying and selling things right in the temple. He turned over tables and drove the vendors out, saying "This is a house of prayer, not a den of robbers" (Mark 11:15–17). Anger is justified when we see God's house being defaced, God's people being tortured, or God's children being harmed, neglected and ill-treated.

But the other type of anger—the anger that arises when our pride is hurt, when things don't go our way—well, that's not so constructive. A Christian monk from the 4<sup>th</sup> century named Evagrius wrote "*Anger is given to us by God to help us confront true evil. We [sin] when we use it casually, against other people, to gratify our own desires for power or control.*"<sup>1</sup> We know this to be true; we recognized evil anger in Darth Vader of Star Wars or Voldemort of Harry Potter. Other examples from literature show the unholy connection between murder and anger: the irrational feud between the Montagues and Capulets in Romeo and Juliet; the blind jealousy in Othello that leads to the death of a beloved spouse. It's also in the bible, in the story of Cain and Abel—the elder brother who kills the younger brother in anger over a case of wounded pride and jealousy. That story seems to embody precisely what Jesus was warning against. God said to Cain, "Why are you angry? ...If you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:6–7).

On one hand we have an Old Testament story of sacrifices, anger and murder—and then on the other we have Jesus’ New Testament words about murder, anger and reconciliation: *When you are offering your gift at the altar, and remember that there is anger between you and your brother or sister, leave your gift and go first be reconciled; then come and offer your gift.* (Matthew 5:23–24). What started with the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” moved into a discussion of anger that expanded and rippled out further into the topic of reconciliation – about how we are to heal broken relationships.

Jesus’ words offer a different ending to the story. He invites us to see things in a new way, from a new perspective. Here’s an analogy that comes from former CMU professor Randy Pausch and his well-known “Last Lecture,” delivered shortly before he died of pancreatic cancer. One of Pausch’s doctors was good about casting things in a positive light whenever possible. When Pausch asked him, “How long before I die?” the doctor answered, “You probably have three to six months of good health [ahead of you].” Pausch said that reminded him of his time at Disneyworld. If you ask an employee, “When does the park close?” they’re supposed to answer, “The park is *open* until 8 p.m.”<sup>2</sup>

We may think that lashing out in anger hurts the other person, but it always hurts us. Buddha once said, *“Holding on to anger is like grabbing a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.”* Booker T. Washington said, *“I shall allow no man to belittle my soul by making me hate him.”* The ripples moving out from the topic of anger remind us that we are the ones diminished when we hate, when we lash out violently in words or deeds. The ripples of Jesus words move us from talking about anger to talking about reconciliation—about coming to terms with those with whom we have differences—and then coming before God with our gifts and offerings of faith.

Now here’s where the sermon took a funny turn, or perhaps a Spirit-led re-direction. When I thought about Jesus’ words on being reconciled with our brothers and sisters, I realized just how timely his comments were, given today’s political climate. I next wondered how reconciliation actually happens. Jesus doesn’t go into details, except to say “Put down your gift, be reconciled, and then come back.” So, at the very least, to be reconciled must require personal contact—seeking out others, looking them in the eyes, talking and listening to them, asking forgiveness and offering forgiving—making things right face to face.

Anger arises when we close our eyes and picture a distorted version of the person in front of us—this one who wronged me, cut me off in traffic, mistreated me, and wounded my pride. Reconciliation happens when we open our eyes and see a real face in front of us—a person known by God, with their own wounds, scars and fears; and I lay down what’s in my hands (my piety, my pride, my gift for God’s altar) so that I can focus on them face to face—so that our relationship might be healed and show the love God intends for us and for this world.

Now, just as the bible scholars reflecting on this passage sent me back to Cain and Abel in Genesis, they also sent me forward to one of the little letters near the end of the New Testament—to I John chapter 3, where it says this: *This is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother... Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. We know love by this that [Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.*

Murder—anger—reconciliation—love for one another. The ripples moved out one from another, when just then my phone rang. As many of you know, our church has been a strong advocate seeking justice for Martin Esquivel-Hernandez and his family. Although undocumented, they are active in our community and church and their youngest child is an American citizen. Martin is fighting deportation. Our Session met several weeks ago and decided that, if necessary in order to keep Martin’s family together, we would offer him sanctuary here at our church. That would mean housing him within our walls until his naturalization papers could be worked out allowing him to stay in America legally.

Sadly Martin remains in jail and at growing risk of being deported, despite the best efforts of many. When my phone rang, it was one of the young lawyers advocating for Martin calling to tell me that immigration officers were going to pick up 6 people for outstanding traffic violations, raiding their homes in the early morning hours and deport them. Could we help? All this was new and uncharted territory. I spoke with others on staff. Potentially a family—two undocumented parents with two children, born in this country—needed to hide in our church for 48 hours to avoid being split up. Martin’s situation I knew about and our Session knew about it and supported sanctuary for him. This was different, and yet it was the same: a family vs. a system intent on breaking up families that contain no terrorists or community risks. What should be done?

I went back to my sermon preparation. I remembered I had been reading in First John about loving one another. The very next verse in that passage, I kid you not, said this: *How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.* (I John 3:17–18) I called back the lawyer and said, “If there is a family that needs us this weekend, we will house them in our sanctuary church.”

If anger can be as bad as murder—if anger diminishes us, belittles our soul, forces us to close our eyes to the other—and if reconciliation is seeing with open eyes, face to face, loving others, especially those who are in need right before us as we literally possess the world’s goods and stand before the Lord’s altar—then may the ripples of this passage wash over us all in Jesus’ simple message from his Sermon on the Mount.

“You have heard it said from ancient times, “Whoever murders shall be liable to judgment,” but I say to you, “Put aside your anger—your divisiveness—your fear. And put down your gift—your piety—your self-focus. Go and be reconciled. Look the others in the face. Then come back together—to this place, to this table. Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk*, 1996, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> Randy Pausch, *The Last Lecture*, 2008, p. 62.