

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

February 16, 2020 (6th Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A)
Matthew 5:21-37

Pastor Shelley Cunningham wrote this a couple year's back (Luther Seminary God Pause, Feb. 13, 2014):

There's an ongoing debate at our house about what constitutes a clean bedroom. Does the bed have to be neatly made, or does tossing the comforter over a pile of blankets count? Must clothes be put in drawers, or just stacked up on the dresser? Can stuff simply be out of sight (even if that means shoved under the bed or in the closet)? As you might imagine, what mom thinks and what the kids think don't agree. And isn't it convenient that following the SPIRIT of the law makes it a whole lot EASIER on the kids?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus EXPANDS the meaning of the commandments.... But instead of making it EASIER, Jesus is actually casting a WIDER net. Following Jesus means being held to a HIGHER standard.

This is actually a little ODD for Jesus. He's usually the one criticizing OTHERS for following the law TOO STRICTLY, too rigidly. He healed on the Sabbath, he touched unclean people, he ate and drank with the undesirables of society, because he knew that the SPIRIT of the law was LOVE.

But here, Jesus tightens UP the law. It's not good enough to just NOT kill someone, it's not good enough to just NOT commit adultery, it's not good enough to just NOT lie when you swear an oath. God expects more than that. God expects us to do better than that. And there's a lot at stake here.

These are some of the HARSHEST words that Jesus ever speaks. He says it's better to MUTILATE yourself, to CUT off your hand, or TEAR out your eye than to end up in HELL WITH them. These aren't the kind of things we'd expect JESUS to say. It's called hyperbole. Jesus is EXAGGERATING to make a point. He wants us to NOTICE this point, to get our attention. There's something PARTICULARLY important going on here that Jesus wants to make sure we don't miss.

There's a lot here, and each of these paragraphs could be its own sermon, so I want to focus on the FIRST of his examples: anger. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not murder.' But I say to you that if you are ANGRY with a brother or sister, you will be liable to JUDGMENT." Hmm. It's EASY to point a finger in judgment at a MURDERER, but JESUS points the finger DIRECTLY at US. He makes NO DISTINCTION between anger and murder. They're the SAME in GOD'S eyes; anger is JUST as great a sin as murder.

A few years ago, I was trying to install a door in my basement, an unfinished pine door. I was a first-time do-it-yourselfer, so it would have been a challenge anyway, but there was something ABOUT THIS door – it was the most warped, bowed and twisted thing I've ever seen. There's wasn't a straight line in that frame anywhere. I worked ALL day just trying to get ONE side of it to line up level and plumb. And then Wendy got home from work and came downstairs and looked at the fruit of my labors, and do you know what she said? She said, "Are you sure that's straight?" Well, lock me up and haul me before the judge, because I got ANGRY.

You know what I'm talking about, because you've BEEN there. Anger is natural. Anger can be a strangely SATISFYING emotion. Theologian 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 your tongue over 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 fit for a KING. The chief DRAWBACK is that what you are wolfing DOWN at the feast is YOU."

What he means is that anger may feel satisfying for a MOMENT, but it's TOXIC. It EATS away at you, from the INSIDE out. It destroys you.

But more importantly, when it lashes OUT, it destroys ANOTHER person. So Jesus expands his point even further, "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."

Do you realize the DESTRUCTION words can do? There's a video you need to see.

(Show Words Do Hurt)

Words do hurt. That video created quite a stir when it first went viral a couple years ago, and what's SAD is that some of that attention was MALICIOUS. MORE insults were heaped upon this poor girl. Our capacity to HURT people seems INEXHAUSTIBLE.

Are you starting to see why God CARES whether you get ANGRY? And why it's so IMPORTANT?

In our Lord's Prayer, Jesus LINKS our relationship with GOD to our relationship with OTHERS: "Forgive us our trespasses, (what does it say?) AS we forgive those who trespass AGAINST us." Have you ever thought about the IMPLICATIONS of that petition? God treats us the SAME as WE treat his OTHER children. If we can't bring ourselves to love OTHERS, and maybe even love OURSELVES, how are we EVER going to GENUINELY believe that we ARE loved by GOD? Anger creates a BARRIER to love, and that SAME wall that we erect between us and others, ALSO stands us between us and GOD. But this isn't a punishment. God LOVES us, but that WALL doesn't LET GOD IN. God wants to FORGIVE us, but a heart that can't GIVE forgiveness, can't RECEIVE it either.

We build that SAME wall with Jesus' OTHER examples, with lust and lying. That's why this is so IMPORTANT to Jesus. And why he talks about going to hell. Because, if you're separated from God by that WALL in your heart, you're ALREADY in hell, and Jesus will do ANYTHING to SAVE you from that.

And so, he tells us how to tear DOWN that wall. He tells us to make peace with our brothers and sisters. And he gives a couple examples of THAT too.

ONE of those might sound FAMILIAR. He said, "So when you're 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." There's a part of our worship that we do every week, and in a PARTICULAR PLACE, right BEFORE the offering, BECAUSE of this verse. Do you know what it is? That's right, it's the sharing of the peace. This verse is WHY we share the peace, and WHEN we do it, because, BEFORE we can come before God to offer our praise and ask for forgiveness, we need to make peace with our BROTHERS and SISTERS FIRST. We need to tear DOWN that wall.

There's an old legend. One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a debate that goes on inside every person. He said, "My son, the battle is between 2 'wolves' inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee replied simply, "The one you FEED."

So which one is it? Which wolf will YOU feed -- the one that GIVES you LIFE, or the wolf that EATS YOU? Amen.