

Sermon February 12, 2023

Mt. 5.21-27, New Song

The Rev. Mel Schlachter

LET'S FACE IT. WE ALL HAVE A HISTORY WITH SOME PART OF THIS GOSPEL, RIGHT? OFTEN FROM A TENDER AGE, IF WE HAVE BEEN AROUND THE CHURCH THAT LONG. MY FAMILY'S GERMAN STOICISM AND ENGLISH STIFF UPPER LIP SENT ANGER UNDERGROUND. "WHO, ME ANGRY? I'M NOT ANGRY." BEFORE LONG I WAS GUILT FREE AND MORE EFFECTIVE BEING PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE. RING A FEW BELLS FOR YOU?

AND LUST? OH MY GOODNESS. I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL WHEN I HEARD OUR PRIEST PREACH AHEAD OF LENT THAT A GOOD THING TO GIVE UP FOR LENT WAS THE LAST THING YOU THINK ABOUT BEFORE YOU GO TO SLEEP.

I DON'T KNOW WHERE HE GOT THAT. BUT YOU KNOW WHAT A ROBUST HIGH SCHOOL BOY THINKS ABOUT ON HIS PILLOW—SO I GAVE UP DATING FOR LENT. WELL, I WAS A RATHER SHY KID AND I HAD ONE DATE ALL YEAR AND THAT TO A CHURCH OUTING, , SO WHAT I NEEDED TO GIVE UP WAS NOT DATING.

BOTH SITUATIONS SHOW HOW ADEPT WE ARE AT TWISTING JESUS' INTENTION TO FIT OUR OWN WAY OF LOOKING AT LIFE, OUR OWN RESISTANCE.

I THINK I GOT 'ADULTERY' RIGHT, HOWEVER. IN THE LATE 1970'S I WAS MAKING WINE LATE AT NIGHT IN THE BASEMENT OF THE BUILDING NEXT TO OURS, ACTUALLY SQUEEZING THE JUICE OUT OF GRAPES WITH A LINEN BAG. IT WAS WORK, MY HANDS A LOVELY PURPLE. IN THE MIDST OF THIS EXHAUSTING MEDITATIVE ACTIVITY A THOUGHT OCCURRED TO ME—I

AM HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH MY WINE. I DON'T REMEMBER THE STATE OF OUR MARRIAGE BACK THEN, BUT I MUST HAVE BEEN DEFLECTING SOMETHING. AS YOU KNOW I DIDN'T STOP MAKING WINE, BUT I NEEDED TO QUIT USING IT TO AVOID. I THINK I GOT JESUS' INTENTION.

SO HOW ABOUT A BOTLE LABEL SAYING "NON-ADULTERY WINE"?

THERE IS AN ALTERNATIVE READING TO THE VERSE "IF YOU ARE ANGRY WITH YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER YOU WILL BE LIABLE" ETC. –AN ANCIENT MANUSCRIPT ADDS "WITHOUT CAUSE" AFTER "YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER." THAT POOR SCRIBE JUST COULD NOT GIVE UP WHAT HE THOUGHT OF AS 'RIGHTEOUS ANGER' AND HE MUST HAVE FIGURED JESUS WOULD BACK HIM UP. AH, OUR CAPACITY FOR KEEPING JESUS' SIMPLE WORDS AT ARMS

LENGTH, FROM WHERE OUR RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD.

ONE ALERT SCHOLAR REMINDS US THAT JESUS WAS NOT TALKING ABOUT JUST GETTING ANGRY AT THE OFFICE OR OVER THANKSGIVING DINNER, BUT HOW TO LIVE IN A ROMAN-OCCUPIED LAND FRAUGHT WITH TENSION FROM EVERY SIDE.

PROFESSOR VAN DRIEL BELIEVES THAT JESUS WALKED A PATH BETWEEN THE ZEALOTS—WHO CARRIED KNIVES UNDER THEIR ROBES (MURDER COULD FOLLOW ANGER) AND SOUGHT INSURRECTION—AND, ON THE OTHER HAND, THE PHARISEES, WHO BY NOW WERE TRYING JUST TO CARVE OUT A NICHE FOR CARRYING ON JEWISH TRADITION DESPITE THE CONFLICT.

IT WOULD BE EXPECTED FOR ONE TO BE VERY ANGRY WITH THE ROMANS. OR IF YOU WERE

A REBEL, ALSO WITH THE JEWS WHO DID NOT WANT WAR AND WOULD PUT UP WITH THE AWFUL PRICE OF OPPRESSION.

SO THERE IS NOTHING TRIVIAL ABOUT JESUS' TEACHING ON ANGER. WE KNOW PARALLEL SITUATIONS IN OUR OWN DAY, WHEN ANGER FILLS THE AIR, WHEN DEATH AND SUFFERING ARE SO PRESENT IF NOT ALWAYS SEEN.

FOR JESUS TO NAVIGATE A NON-VIOLENT COURSE BETWEEN ALL THE PARTIES, AND YET A COURSE DEDICATED TO JUSTICE, HE HAD TO COACH HIS FOLLOWERS PAST ANGRY REACTIONS, TO STRATEGIC ACTIONS. HE COULD HAVE A ZEALOT IN HIS INNER CIRCLE, AND HE COULD DINE AT PHARISEES' TABLES. HE SOUGHT THEM AS POTENTIAL ALLIES—ONE STEEPED IN TRADITION, THE OTHER WILLING TO GIVE THEIR LIVES FOR JUSTICE AND

LIBERATION--BUT HE KNEW HOW TO COMBINE THEM FOR BRINGING ABOUT GOD'S KINGDOM, THE HEAVENLY REALM, IN HIS PART OF THE WORLD. HOLY WEEK WOULD SHOW THAT ATTEMPT, AND ALSO HOW BOTH GROUPS WOULD MISTAKE HIS INTENTION, AND BETRAY.

IN EACH OF THE "BUT I SAY TO YOU" TEACHINGS JESUS DOES WHAT HE SAYS—TO FULFILL THE LAW, NOT JUST OBSERVE IT. WHAT ARE GOD'S INTENTIONS FOR A LAW, THEN LET'S DO THAT. THE TORAH IS NOT TO KEEP US OUT OF SIN, REALLY, BUT TO PUT US INTO GOD'S PRESENCE.

THE FIRST INTENTION FOR EVERY ONE OF THESE IS RECONCILIATION: TO BE ONE WITH YOUR FRIEND, YOUR COLLEAGUE, YOUR SPOUSE, YOUR ADVERSARY. IF YOU

REMEMBER THAT YOU HAVE HURT OR OFFENDED SOMEONE, LEAVE THIS SERVICE AT THE PEACE AND GO TO THEM AND BE RECONCILED. THEN COME BACK FOR COMMUNION.

WITH THE RESPONSIBILITY ON THE OFFENDER FOR STARTING THE HEALING, THIS IS VERY DIFFERENT FROM OUR MODERN CUSTOM. WE SETTLE FOR “I APOLOGIZE IF I HAVE UNINTENTIONALLY CAUSED ANYONE HARM” FROM THE OFFENDER, AND KEEP ASKING THE VICTIM, “HAVE YOU FORGIVEN HIM YET?”

IN HER MARVELOUS BOOK “ON REPENTANCE AND REPAIR,” RABBI DANYA RUTTENBERG BELIEVES THAT OUR RELIGIOUS TRADITION MANDATES THE OFFENDER INVESTIGATE HOW HE/SHE/THEY HAVE CAUSED HARM, CONFESS IT, AND REPAIR AS THE VICTIM NEEDS AND WANTS.

YOU NOTICE OF COURSE THAT IN THE TEACHINGS ON ADULTERY AND DIVORCE, JESUS IS QUITE COUNTERCULTURAL AND PUTS THE ONUS ON THE MAN FOR THE PROBLEM. HE IS THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN DRAW A DIVORCE WRIT, HE MAKES THE LOYALTY DECISIONS. IN BOTH CASES THE WOMAN WOULD BE ABANDONED TO POVERTY AND ABUSE. AMAZING THAT THE CHURCH NEVER GOT JESUS' INTENT RIGHT FOR CENTURIES. ALWAYS THE WOMAN IS THE TEMPTRESS, THE DEMON.

TO CREATE GOD'S KINGDOM ON EARTH, WE NEED RECONCILIATION. WE ALSO NEED INTEGRITY, WHICH IS THE SECOND QUALITY BUBBLING UP IN THIS PASSAGE.

DON'T SWEAR AN OATH. WHY? BECAUSE THEN YOU ARE SAYING THE REST OF YOUR SPEECH ISN'T NECESSARILY TRUSTWORTHY.

THEN JESUS' HYPERBOLE—DO YOU HAVE A WANDERING EYE LEADING YOU TO TROUBLE? PLUCK IT OUT SO YOUR WHOLE SELF DOESN'T END UP A DISASTER. A HAND THAT DOESN'T KNOW HOW TO RESTRAIN ITSELF? SAME THING. GOD'S REALM WANTS YOUR WHOLE HEART, THE INTEGRITY, THE SINGULARITY, OF YOUR BEING.

ENOUGH. ONCE AGAIN I AM ANGRY WITH THE SCHOLARS WHO IN THEIR LECTONARY PLANNING HAVE PASSAGES LIKE THIS COME ALONG JUST AS I AM ABOUT TO THINK ABOUT LENTEN DISCIPLINE. SHAME ON THEM. GOOD LUCK WITH WHATEVER ONE OF JESUS' TEACHINGS HAS YOUR NAME ON IT.