

## **Epiphany 6, Year A—RCL**

February 13, 2011

Trinity Episcopal Church, St. Charles, MO

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; I Corinthians 3: 1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

The lessons from Holy Scripture today are the kind to make a preacher wish she weren't. On a positive note, we hear in Deuteronomy, "Choose life." In today's portion of Psalm 119, we learn that to follow the law is to be happy, safe and protected from sin. In First Corinthians, St. Paul admonishes the church at Corinth to stop acting like little children, quarrelling and competing with each other. And then, we hear Jesus speaking to his disciples in Matthew . . .

The passages from Matthew's Gospel this morning are hard sayings, hard to hear and tempting to set aside as exaggerated. We need to pay attention to them, however, because they say important things about life in a community, human loneliness, and God's abiding love.

Anger, adultery, divorce, and the taking of oaths are the topics in these passages. In each case, Jesus quotes the law, and then says, "But I say to you . . ." and in each case, what he says transcends the words of the law. What Jesus says sounds impossible to comply with, a sure consignment of all of us to the outer darkness—unless we really listen, not dismiss what he has to say. The truly gruesome things he says—to pluck out an eye, or cut off a hand—these actions are not what he actually intends us to do, but he really wants us to think hard about how we live our lives, and how significant the choices are that we make in our relationships with each other.

As a whole, these passages speak to us about living with other people, a community of people, whether that community is as small as two people with a business relationship, or a pair of spouses, or a whole congregation. The main thing we can read in all of these sections is that it is a sin to make another person an object, a thing, a commodity. When we do that, we are denying the other's humanity, and, essentially denying our own. Every single person, whether we like him or her or not, is made in God's image and is given God's gifts. What Jesus talks about is not just a law, which if followed, "protects" one from sinning, but an understanding that the law is just the beginning of how we order our lives. If we really have a relationship with Christ that feeds us, we will be able to address our natural inclinations.

We will not separate ourselves from other people or from our own lives to the extent that we are consumed by any of the things Jesus talks about, and we will speak the truth. To think more about what it means to make another person or a group into objects, and why this is so damaging, we're going to talk about the first passage, on anger, name-calling, and reconciliation.

Here's a pair of anecdotes I borrowed from an on-line sermon resource:

A man had been bitten by a mad dog, and it looked as if he were going to die. The treatment for rabies wasn't working. The doctor told him that he had better prepare his Last Will and Testament. The man began to write, and he kept writing. He wrote on and on, until the doctor finally remarked, "That certainly is a lengthy will you're making. Do you need me to call in the notary yet?" "Will nothing," the man said, "I'm making a list of the people I'm going to bite!" We can all identify with that—we're all laughing!

Here's the other little story: This is told about Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross. During a conversation with a long-time friend, a third person's name came up. The friend reminded Clara Barton that that third person had been just hateful to Clara Barton years before—mean, vicious, and cruel. “Don't you remember when that happened to you?” Clara Barton's friend asked. “No,” Clara Barton replied, “but I distinctly remember forgetting it.” We're not laughing as hard this time, but we recognize a good thing when we hear it!

Jesus says to his disciples, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall do no 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.”

These are very strong words, and very disturbing. Getting angry isn't exactly something we can help—that's a reaction, a justified and natural reaction, to something that hurts us, disappoints us, or in some way or another, trips us up. What we can help, and what Jesus wants his disciples to pay attention to, is what we do with our anger.

When I was in seventh grade and my sister in fifth, I used to explode at the least hint of teasing. My sister knew exactly how to bait me, and she'd do it. One day, when my father was outside mowing the lawn, she said something to me and I went after her. I must have looked absolutely murderous, because she stopped sneering and took off down the hall, attempting to slow me down by throwing the television antenna at me as she flew out of the living room, and ran to her room. She got inside and locked her door just ahead of me. I pounded my fists on that door so hard that I sprained both wrists.

That was an awful experience for several reasons: First of all, it scared me to death. I realized that had I been able to get to her, I might really have injured her—and I knew that nothing she'd said or could ever say would be worth that. There was also the difficulty of concealing my injured wrists from our father, because neither one of us wanted him to know about this little incident. And the third thing was what to do instead. My sister and I had to talk about that day, and in our own way, we apologized to each other. She knew she'd gone too far, and we both knew I could have gone even further too far without a door in the way.

That's nearly 50 years ago now, and we figured it out—our friendship always was more important than our sibling rivalry—but this could have turned out another way. We could have made different, deeply damaging choices. I could have kept a clear idea in my head of what she'd said and why it was so hurtful; I could have carried a grudge for years—and if I had, I'd be a very different person from who I am today, and so would she.

When we carry grudges, we carry a burden, and the load gets heavier with the passage of time. Eventually, we may go around seething all the time, angry right under the surface, and neither we nor anyone else has any idea what might set us off. We may no longer even remember what made us angry to begin with. I'm not talking about imagined insults—the reasons for our anger are real and justifiable. We have been hurt, ignored, betrayed, insulted, or in some other way injured, and the injury is real.

Jesus tells us that what is necessary to heal from the injury, is to find some way to reconcile with the person who's hurt us, to seek forgiveness, and, harder still, to forgive: "Leave your gift at the altar," he says, "and go be reconciled." And we have to do that work, the forgiveness piece, whether the person who has hurt us ever chooses to apologize or not. If we don't, the anger will destroy us from the inside out. We won't need to worry about the outer darkness—we'll be living in it every day, a lonely place, where we may be right, but being right doesn't help. The very hardest thing to do is to forgive people who don't give a hoot whether we forgive them or not. If we don't do it, however, not only will the anger destroy us, but we will be letting those hurtful people run our lives, even when they're nowhere in sight and we haven't talked to them in years.

I have another story, which I know I've told in Bible Study. I had an uncle, my father's younger brother, who was brilliant, charming, very angry, and an active alcoholic. He and my aunt were divorced after 21 years of marriage, and he spent the next 25 years or so trying to get everyone in the family to take his "side" against his ex-wife. He was estranged from his children, because he kept insisting that they choose between him and their mother; he was estranged from his nieces, for the same reason, and because he deliberately interfered with our relationship with his mother, our grandmother. When he was dying, he sent all of us letters, with the intention he said, of setting things right. As we read our letters, we realized that setting things right was not, in his mind, the same thing as making things right. His letters contained all the ways we had hurt him, and how he was right and we were wrong. They were terrible letters, no intention to reconcile in them at all. Even so, his children went to see him. His oldest daughter was with him when he died, and sister and brother had been there the day before. My cousin Mark had said to him that day, "You know, Dad, you've given lots of reasons why you're mad at all of us, and we have lots of reasons to be mad at you; but it's not worth it." I want you to know that I appreciate all the things we did together when I was a kid, and what you taught me about being a dad. I forgive you for the hateful stuff, and I hope you forgive me. You're my dad, and I love you, no matter what."

I don't know what my uncle said, or what he thought, but I know that my cousin felt a burden lift in this last afternoon with his father. I also know that we don't want to wait till we're on our deathbeds to learn to be forgiving and forgiven. As my cousin said, "It's not worth it."

So how do we do that? The very best way, of course, is to be able to be with the person with whom we need reconciliation, but there are lots of reasons why that may not be possible. The very best way involves something that we can do, however, whether the people are living or dead, and whether we will ever see them again. That way is to pray for them, seriously, intentionally. To this point, I have one more story:

My boss at Grace Church in Jefferson City, then the rector where I went as a deacon-in-training and was ordained a priest, is named Harv Sanders. He's now retired, but the first day I was at Grace Church, he showed me the picture directory. "I've thought long and hard about this, he said, because I don't want to interfere with relationships you might build in this parish before you ever get started, but there is one person I need to warn you about. This person truly is out to get me, and will be out to get you, too. You need to understand that what the person says or does is not about you, and you need to be able to react with charity.

He went on to say that charity was not and had not been for several years his reaction to this person. He was losing sleep over the ways in which the person was undermining him and seriously damaging relationships with other people in the parish. H told me that he'd tried to pray for the person, but finally, he just went into the church and sat in that person's regular place in the pew. He said he'd just sat there for awhile, seeing the church from that person's perspective, and then he started to pray for that person in a way he had been unable to do before. He said he spent quite a while, more than an hour, just sitting there and praying. When they next encountered each other, the person he'd prayed for showed no appreciable change in behavior—as hateful and angry as ever, which is why we was alerting me to what I'd be running into—but, Harv said, he himself was changed. His response to that person was entirely different, truly charitable, and in his changed response he saw others also change. The person was still dangerous, but no longer wreaking havoc.

So, I invite you to try the same thing. Pray for your enemies. Pray for those who have hurt you. Go somewhere where you can do that quietly, fervently, and some place where perhaps you might gain a bit of what their perspective is or might have been. In a way, make a list of those you want to bite, and pray for them instead. Amen.