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St. Thomas Church
2.16.20 Epiphany 6A
Dt. 30:15-20; Corin. 3:1-9; Matt.
5:21-37;

The Gift of a Reconciled Heart

Today's gospel lesson from Matthew presents the preacher with at least twenty possible sermon topics ranging from murder and anger to adultery and divorce, to lying and engaging in double speak. How much time do you all have? This morning we are Jesus' students and we are still in his classroom. His curriculum is taken from his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is calling us to get to the bottom of things. He is challenging us to not be satisfied with just knowing the letter of the law but exploring the deeper emotions that form the spirit behind the law.

Because I can only choose one sermon for today, I am going to chose to preach on the most misunderstood emotion of all—anger--and the most difficult of spiritual practices: reconciliation. Anger is currently the emotion that seems to be the most visible in our culture and is of special concern to us as Christians. We are instructed by Jesus to speak the truth in love and to attempt to resolve conflicts without engaging in violence, estrangement, and divisiveness.

This was such an important issue that Jesus told his early followers to interrupt their worship, set down their offering before the altar, and go take active steps to become reconciled with their brother or sister they were in conflict with—then return and offer their gift to God. Every Sunday morning while worshipping we too are reminded to stop and do the same and address the anger and hurt in our lives that might interfere with our receiving the presence of God in communion.

Our weekly confession begins, "Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor" and then is followed by, "We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves." After the confession and the absolution, we are invited to exchange the Peace as a visible sign that we have been or desire to be reconciled to our neighbor.

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In our Christian tradition there has been a lot of confusion about anger. It is bad? Is it good? Is it bad and good? Often this confusion begins with what we think Jesus did with anger and conflict. I will never forget the time I gave a presentation to a room of twenty-five couples preparing for marriage at University Presbyterian Church. The subject of anger came up. I kept hearing from the group that Jesus turned the other cheek. To which I responded, “yes, but that is not all he did!

Sometimes Jesus drew a hard line in the sand and forcefully challenged people to stop doing what they were doing such as in the case of the moneychangers at the Temple who were ripping people off by monetizing religion. Sometimes Jesus deliberately avoided getting angry or receiving other people’s anger by withdrawing—such as when he left for the desert near Ephraim to avoid persecution by the religious authorities. In other words, Jesus engaged in a practice of discernment—processing his emotions and his motivations—setting aside his own biases—to let in the Spirit of God to guide him.

Anger is morally neutral but what we do with it is not. Improperly handled it can destroy your body and your soul. Modern medicine has identified that it is harder on your heart than any other emotion. Anger can destroy communities, marriages and families. It is clearly harming our country. Anger can be a type of addiction.

But anger can also be a very good thing. It mobilizes us to take action to protect ourselves and those we love when threatened. It reminds us when our boundaries have been crossed or violated. Anger can propel us to stand up for a cause. Without righteous anger there would have been no civil rights movement in our country and our buses and schools would still be segregated. Without a women’s rights movement women in this country would still not be able to vote.

Throughout Scripture you can see that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. This is the middle way that we Anglicans are so fond of finding! Not ever having or expressing anger is impossible and not even wise. It will either give you an ulcer or you will adopt a pattern of conflict avoidance and passive aggression that will lead to many headaches and damaged relationships.

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On the other hand, an explosive kind of anger that leads to intimidation and aggression is emotional dynamite and it has the capacity of blowing up almost everything and everyone around it even if there was a kernel of goodness contained within it.

So, there we have it laid out for us. The danger of expressing no anger when anger is called for and the danger of explosive anger that has no just cause or constructive purpose. Hell is mentioned three different times in our Gospel reading today—so we mustn't overlook it. Hell is created, in large part, by how we deal or don't deal with our anger and is the result of the isolation that is created by broken relationships. We are full capable of creating our personal hell on our own. We don't need to give God the credit!

So, God invites us to stay with the slow anger—the middle way-- to allow us to carefully discern how, when, and if to express it. If we are honest with ourselves, we all need some form of healing around anger. If we divided the room into thirds we would probably correctly identify the third of us who need to express more of our anger directly and straightforwardly, the third of us who need to reel-in our anger and be more diplomatic and the final third of us (maybe larger because we live in the pacific northwest!) who consistently deny we have any anger at all.

The biggest gift we can give ourselves is to acknowledge and be aware of when our anger interferes with our ability to become the agents of reconciliation that we are called to be—essentially when it interferes without ability to love. Paradoxically and surprisingly anger is often a form of love and it appears when something or someone we care about is threatened. The problem is that we don't always love what God loves and this disordered love cause destructive anger—in either the passive or active form. Here are some examples to illustrate this point: sometimes we love to be right more than doing what is right for the health of a relationship; sometimes we love financial security, more than our love for those in need; sometimes we love the status quo more than our love for changes that will allow for the grace of God to flow.

We all need the guidance of the Holy Spirit to understand if what we truly love is truly from God and whether our anger is healthy or unhealthy. And so, I

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invite all of us this morning, to offer our gifts to God before his holy altar—please do keep your pledges up to date—but know that the greatest gift we can offer God is the gift of a reconciled heart. Amen.