

First Things First

Matthew 5:21-26

I love bumper stickers. They give you a bump and boost in the midst of heavy traffic. They can also make you think what kind of person owns that car, too. These days they aren't as much fun since they represent mostly political musings. Many years ago, I used to drive 70 miles each way back and forth to work and let me tell you, sometimes a bumper sticker made the difference. Back then my favorite one read: "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go." Maybe it was just me but my spirit really resonated with that.

Recently, a friend called me to tell me about a bumper sticker that caught her attention and knew I would like. It read, "God wants spiritual fruits, not nuts!" I know what you're thinking, "um hum, I certainly know a few of those spiritual nuts!" In my former church I could have been convinced that Deacon Johnson fit the description of a spiritual nut. She was the greeter extraordinaire, the one you say "good morning how are you?" and she'd say, "I am blessed and highly favored!" She also had the loudest amen in the church. If you wanted to get a prayer through, you wanted Deacon Johnson on your prayer team. I had the privilege to give her a ride home each week for a while. At first I just felt obligated, but the



more I got to know her, the more I understood her and the less nutty she became to me. I think that far too often, we dismiss and diminish people to not being worthy of our largess, our kindness or quite simply we don't give certain people the time of day.

Have you seen the movie *Crash*? It has a scene that strikes me every time, that of Thandie Newton on a burning car screaming for help. There is a police officer close that hears her and decides to take the risk of stepping out of his zone and do something. This is the same officer who just two nights before humiliated her husband and violated her physically, just because "they fitted the description." In a moment like this, hanging between life and death, she has to decide whether or not to extend her hand and trust him, or risk death by the flames of the car. What a situation! It was like putting her trust and giving her life into the hands of her enemy.

How many of us know someone who has gone to their grave with a grudge? I do. My mother and my paternal grandmother fell out of touch after my father's death because my grandmother refused to come to my father's funeral even after my mother offered to pay for her to come. Years of unresolved hurt and unprocessed anger resulted in my own inability of



say my final goodbyes to my paternal grandmother because my family was not contacted upon her passing.

Family therapists call that kind of separation, “cut offs.” In some ways, I attribute my desire to dismiss people who are not of my same mind, who are not of my ilk and pedigree, and more importantly, who get on my last nerve, I attribute that to my inherited behavior of cut-offs. So you see, I can’t help myself, I could say I got it honestly!

As hard as it is to believe, God created us to live harmonious lives. With all the examples in our current environment that indicate war and disagreement, strife in our homes and our families, it is hard to believe that if God meant for us to live in harmony with each other, that God did not give us better people to work with. Instead, it seems that we are called to be in relationship with the most difficult, cantankerous, self-centered and hard-headed people on the planet. Why is that? In our scripture this morning on Matthew 5:23-24 from the New King James Version, we find these words:

²³ Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the



altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (NKJV)

We try to make the vertical relationship with God perfect when we can't get right with the horizontal thing, I mean, relationships with people. The scripture says “if you realize your brother or sister has something against you, go first and work it out with them and ‘then and only then, come back and work things out with God.” Let's hear what the scripture says in a modern translation by Eugene Peterson called The Message:

“This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.” (The Message)

I believe that we cannot effectively have horizontal relationships without God. You know how we, worship leaders or pastors, will tell you to turn to your neighbor and tell them “Jesus loves you and so do I and there ain't a thing you can do about it.” Some of us would quite rightly say in response, ‘try me.’ Why is it that the most difficult people to communicate with, work with, live with are our teacher, boss, co-worker, neighbor, sister,



brother, mom, dad, husband, wife or Pastor? Seriously God!? I can't give you fruit because I'm spinning my wheels down here with all these nuts!

And yet, why does God keep calling us to bear fruit among all these hard shelled nuts in our families, our workplaces and even our churches? That is the conundrum that our text addresses. We find our text in the beginning of the infamous Sermon on the Mount, where you hear "blessed are the poor in spirit... blessed are they that... blessed are the meek..." This is what Jesus says immediately before our text for today. In this introduction, we hear him say many contradictions to our reality. You want to ask, 'Are you sure Jesus that the meek and not the powerful will inherit the earth?' What then will it look like for the meek to inherit such a thing? In our scripture, he begins a series of challenges to the Law, the instructions for living also found in the Old Testament and for our particular verse found in the Ten Commandments. But, our text begins with 'therefore,' meaning it is connected to a previous assertion or statement.

²¹ You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.'²² But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire."



Therefore, if you so much as call your friend a fool you are planting the seeds of murder. Now Jesus is not saying that the old law goes away and now I'm the new sheriff in town. No, Jesus is saying to the multitudes, and to us now, that living for the kingdom of God is serious business. It's tough stuff and you can't simply say, "I'll follow these rules so therefore I'm good and everybody else should fend for themselves." Jesus takes the sixth commandment, and strengthens it! He says don't you know that anger is the ancestor to murder? You don't only have to kill the body to commit murder, but you have the power through unresolved anger to kill the spirit. When we are separated by anger from one another, we lack understanding of each other's lived experience and contribute to our own complicity (our responsibility), for diminishing our sister or brother's quality of life. Allowing anger to fester separates us and impacts our brother and sister's personhood, even their self-esteem.

And it is for that reason that Jesus goes on to say, "if that is the case, before you bring your offering, first get right with the one who is angry with you." You see, being a Christian really isn't easy as it looks! It is enough to ask me to apologize for being angry at someone, but now I have to be proactive and seek the one who is angry at me? It's hard and that's why I say we can't get our horizontal relationships in order without having a



strong vertical relationship with God. But Jesus says it's different. You have to get right with each other first before you can get right with God. Jesus says that relationship is worship. You can't worship God and not be in right relationship with your neighbor. Here is an interesting tidbit or side point if you will stay with me. We tend to read this text very literally, when in fact when it was written, there was not a church on every corner. It was not practical to leave your offering at the altar and come back after you found and reconciled with your friend. The Temple was at least a day's journey for many.

It is assumed that every time you come to worship you will be bringing an offering, and that offering/giving is implied in worship. For that reason, Jesus is saying in this sermon, when you come to church to worship, knowing that you have relationships that are out of line – fix it first. You cannot worship God and not be in right relationship with your brother or sister, neighbor or friend, co-worker or boss, wife or husband, mother, father or Pastor.

How many of us “were born” Christian? I contend, not one of us. Somebody introduced us to Christ. When I was a student intern at Faith Missionary Baptist Church, when a new member was presented to the



church, they were instructed to tell who brought them to faith. They were announce their relationship with a member first, who brought them to Christ. They would say, 'My name is April Johnson and I got my start with Michael Jones.'" What if every congregation asked that of their new and existing membership? We are members of this congregation because of invitation by someone we are or were in relationship with.

I believe that God brings people into our lives for a reason, a season or a lifetime. Sometimes for all three purposes so that our own self-understanding will be challenged and we will be sharpened, and shaped into the people God's desires to be God's witnesses in His kingdom. But in reality, we are not in true community, true relationship with God if we are not accountable to each other.

In our text Jesus is affirming and tightening the Law by saying, add to the letter of the law, the Spirit of the law. Don't murder with your eyes, ladies. Men, don't murder the ladies with by overprotecting your emotions. We are safe with each other. *We have to be*, we are all we have.

You know, I have found it is not enough to not respond in kind when somebody has something against me. The writer of Galatians says the fruit of the spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,



faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. To sleep with anger is to die a slow death. It is said by Thanatologists, people who study the psychology of death and dying that people say that we die how we lived. We bring to our everyday life all that we are, all that we have experienced; all those spiritual nuts who drive us crazy, who make us mad and who make us glad. We bring to our interactions, to our family and our place of worship all that we are and all that we have experienced. I don't know about you but I don't wanna bring hatred and anger to my job. I don't wanna bring jealousy and stinginess to my church. I don't wanna come home depleted because I haven't figured out how to show them just how right I always am (and how wrong they are.)

Reconciliation is one of the highest forms of worship. Let us not assume that we have gotten anywhere on our own. But it was the love of Jesus Christ, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6). Because God desired and desires relationship with us so deeply, I pray that we will not let human conviction prevent us from the spiritual conviction we need to love, be patient, be kind



and gentle with ourselves and each other. Ah, Jesus loves us this we know. But we can't just come to church to show each other how much Jesus just loves *you!* We come to worship to solidify and to strengthen God's love in us and *through us*. Oh, people of God, this day, this is the Lord's day, may we know that relationship is the highest form of worship.

Therefore, first things first. "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (NKJV). Spiritual nuts and all, "It is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that produces Christian virtues in the believer's life" (Note in NIV Study Bible p. 1787). May we all be blessed and encouraged today to do what the Spirit is calling us to do.

