

“Healthy Spirituality Produces Reconciliation”  
Exodus 34:4-10; Psalm 32:1-2, 8-11;  
2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Matthew 5:21-32

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In today's Gospel, Jesus is moving beyond the introductory overview. He has suggested that he's going to teach us what it means to be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees. He is fulfilling the law. In some ways it feels like now we're getting down to brass tacks. So the very first thing he says today is, "You have heard it said don't murder." Murder is the most obvious thing you can do to break a relationship. There's nothing you can do once it's done. That's pretty clear. Murder breaks relationships.

But then Jesus goes on to say all this stuff about anger. Even if you're angry... Well, maybe we need to take a minute and think a little bit about anger. Anger is something that comes over us, that happens to us. I'm not sure he's saying that we're ever going to get rid of that emotion that comes. But there is something we sometimes do because of it. We allow the anger to direct our actions. We can react quickly out of anger. Sometimes I think anger is an appropriate thing. If there's injustice and anger wells up and we notice that anger, it can help us recognize the injustice. Jesus is suggesting not to stay in the anger, but to use what it helps us notice.

The problem is that oftentimes when I get angry it's not simply because something has been unjust. Sometimes I get angry just because my expectations aren't met. There's a fine line between when something is unjust and when it's just an expectation I have about the way something is supposed to be. We often talk about seeing red when we are angry. It takes away our ability to think, or at least it gets in the way. It takes away more appropriate reactions.

Anger can lead to all kinds of problems. I think anger and violence go together. There's a violence in speaking when we're angry. There's a likelihood of violent actions. So when we begin to think about anger, we can think about violence. Some people would say we have an epidemic of violence among us. It's certainly true that of the female homicides in the United States, a third of them are perpetrated by a husband, an intimate. One woman in six will experience violence at the hand of a partner.

Anger. Jesus wants us to take a moment and think. One of the things we can do when we're angry is simply notice it and step back. Sometimes it's useful when we get angry to count to ten. It gives us a time to get out of what some people call our fast-thinking state and get into our slow-thinking state. Anger, Jesus says again, breaks a relationship. Once it's broken it's hard to put back together.

He's going to keep going. It's not just being angry, it's about dealing with the relationship we have with one another. The next thing he says is that even if you say "raccha" to someone, it breaks a relationship. It is translated as "fool," but that's probably a little polite. Some people say that "raccha" means something like, "I want to

clear my throat and get rid of you.” It’s an expression of contempt for the other. How can you express contempt without breaking the relationship? It says you’re liable before the council. If you are contemptuous toward the people around you, then the people around you have the right to decide what to do with you. Contempt breaks relationships.

Sometimes it feels like we should stop there. Isn’t that enough? But Jesus keeps going. He says that even if you say “that’s foolish,” disrespecting the opinions and expression of somebody else, that’s breaking relationship. Now, he says if you do that, you’re liable to be sent into the hell of fire. I think we have to be careful there because we have such an experience of what hell means over the last two thousand years, if I said the word “gehenna” to you, it probably wouldn’t mean anything to you. That’s the word that is translated “hell.” It really means the garbage dump that’s burning on the edge of town. It’s the name of an actual location. So if we begin to disregard people, if we treat people without respect, we’re liable to simply be thrown in the garbage dump. We’re liable to be treated with no respect because it breaks our relationships.

Some people suggest that as we go down this list, it’s getting more important. I don’t think so. I still think murder is the central one. But what Jesus is doing is saying, “Here’s what the law gave you.” Murder. But he wants you to go further than that. Don’t work out of your anger; figure out what it’s about. Don’t even be contemptuous of others; don’t say their thoughts are foolish. He hasn’t really stopped yet because he goes on to say, “If you have something against someone else and you are coming to worship, go get reconciled.” It feels to me like he’s saying if we have something against someone else it makes it difficult to worship. There’s a way in which having something against someone has broken our relationships.

Or perhaps it’s the other way around. Perhaps it’s that someone else has something against me. I find this just as hard as having something against someone else. I can let go of that, but to have someone else let go of something against me might mean that I have to go talk to them about it. That’s what Jesus says. Meet your accuser before you get to court because there are consequences to broken relationships. One consequence could be our isolation and alienation from other people.

So Jesus is extending the law. It’s easy to think I’m not going to murder anybody, but with each step Jesus takes, he gets deeper into my own life, deeper into inviting me to let go of the things that cause the breaking of relationships, and really, when you get to the end of that he’s going to invite us back into reconciliation. He already went there in saying that when somebody has something against you or you have something against somebody else, be reconciled with them. He’s inviting us to see where and what the law is for and about. Get beyond that which breaks relationships. Eventually he’s going to invite us to love one another just as he loved us. But now he’s giving these more negative examples.

The scripture goes on here because he’s not done giving examples. In fact, we’ll get some more next week. Next, let’s take another relationship that gets broken. Everyone

knows that adultery is wrong, so if we take that way of breaking a relationship and take a look at it, what happens in it? Why does that break happen? Jesus starts out by saying that if you even think about it, if you lust in your heart, if you engage in a way of thinking, it takes you down the wrong path. We can step back and look. We know when we're going in the wrong direction. We don't always not want to go in the wrong direction.

Then he says there are three more things we can think about there. Where does it come from? One, it can come from inside so he talks about the heart. It comes from inside. It's not an unnatural thing for someone to look at another person and see them as attractive, be attracted, but if we allow that to take us in a place that begins to be lustful, if we allow that to take us into a way of breaking relationships and going from one that's appropriate to one that's not, it comes from inside.

Then, he says you can also see. I think he's saying you can also be seduced. In some ways, I think we're all in the process of being seduced whenever we watch a lot of ads or see a lot of advertising today attempting to get us to think, often sexually, about a product. I can take us down that path, and presumably we buy the product on the way.

So it can come from inside, it can come from outside, and the final thing is how we react, what we do. How do we use our hands? "Hand" indicates action. What kind of action do you actually take? Do you walk farther in or do you walk away? Now, what gets a lot of play in these verses is the idea of tearing the eye out or cutting off the hand. Those are graphic pictures, and certainly we could take them metaphorically. Can we begin to tear ourselves away from what we're looking at? Can we cut off what we're doing and go in a different direction? I think Jesus is actually inviting us to take real action, recognize when we're doing one of those things and take a different direction, sometimes physically. Walk out. Walk away. Turn away.

Notice what he's doing. He's saying from this example, which is pretty clear, it can come from inside or it can come from outside and we can begin to react to it and get drawn into it, and there comes a point where we will take part in the action. It's not just adultery. It is other kinds of things in our lives. It can come from inside; it can come from outside. And we have a choice of how we're going to participate. He's extending the law. He's helping us begin to see how we interact with our world and what we need to keep track of, and he's doing it around relationships.

Jesus has given us prime examples of ways to break relationships – murder, adultery – and then he goes on to divorce. I think what he's saying with divorce is that when you break relationships, there are real consequences. Divorce is a way of breaking that relationship and there are real consequences. He says, "You can give a writ and feel like it's done, but I say to you there is more to it." I think he's giving a description of exactly what happened in his society. Once that writ was given, basically that woman was considered an adulteress and anybody who got involved with her was considered an adulterer. He wasn't setting up a new law, but he was showing us the consequences of relationship broken.

Jesus is extending, he's completing, he's accomplishing what the law is about, helping us begin to look at how we do things and how we act and what we can pay attention to. It's kind of the negative side of things. Paul goes on and talks about the more positive: that we're to be reconciled to one another even as Christ has reconciled us to God, that we have a ministry of reconciliation, of trying to overcome the differences. It's the same thing Jesus said when he said, "If someone has something against you, try to get that solved." If you have something against somebody, go solve it. Be reconciled.

Jesus is extending, showing the purpose, guiding us in the direction of the law and about what he is about. So let me leave you with one way of going about this this week. It's going to be an acronym for "nice." I want you to be "nice" this week, and here's what I'm suggesting. Nice can sometimes be a trivialization, but we can also recognize when we meet a nice person. So, N.I.C.E.

First is *Notice*. It feels to me like that's what Jesus is inviting us to do, is notice our experience. When we become angry, when we become interested, when we feel broken, notice and look for insights. *Insights*. What are the insights I get when I notice? What do I begin to see? Then think about the *Consequences* of what I've seen and noticed. Really, sometimes I think consequences is the hard one because I may notice that I've got a broken relationship with someone, I may have insight into what I need to do, and I recognize that the consequence is that I might be reconciled, and I'm not sure I want to do that. It's a calling. Jesus calls us to notice the consequence and then to *Engage*, to go ahead, to work it out, to look for a pathway.

So that's what I would invite us to do. I think that's what Jesus is offering us. Extending the law. It's not just murder that breaks relationships. And the more we can notice before those relationships get broken, the better, because it's awfully hard to put the relationships back together. So we are invited, I think, to be "N.I.C.E." Not to trivialize it. Not to say it isn't hard, because I think it is. In fact, I would suggest that we probably, in the end, can't do all this on our own. That is why Christ came: to walk with us, to lead us, to help us know that we are loved so we can share that love, because it's awfully hard to be "N.I.C.E." when we don't feel loved. So we think about that as well, but he is offering us things to do. Be "N.I.C.E."

Let's pray:

Gracious God, it is incredible that we can sit at the feet of Jesus and begin to hear his teaching through scripture, across these many years, into our lives. Lord, let us have ears to hear. Help us to *Notice* not only what he is saying, but what he would help us see. Give us the *Insights* we need that we might recognize the kinds of *Consequences* that you would call us to bring about, and *Engage* in doing so. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.