

“So Angry”

Deuteronomy 5:17; Romans 13:8-10;
Matthew 5:21-26

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Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘you shall not 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...” ~ Matthew 5:21-22

I’m so angry I could kill someone!

That’s an idiom we sometimes use, although today it’s a statement we take a little more seriously than we might have in the past. Yet, we recognize that drive that leads us to want to get rid of a problem in our lives.

As we’re walking through the Ten Commandments, we get to this very simple commandment: You shall not murder. It seems very straightforward. Most of us can probably say we’ve not done that. So we can easily walk past this commandment. If we look closely at the commandment itself, the Hebrew word for “murder” used there means “to dash to pieces.” So if we think about that idea of dashing something to pieces, it begins to have some metaphorical value that might go a little further than just thinking about murdering someone.

I don’t know how many of you have seen the movie “Amadeus”. It’s about the rivalry between Salieri and Mozart, two composers of classical music. Salieri wants to be this wonderful composer and prays that God will make him that. Then this upstart Mozart comes along, and he neither pays attention to God nor to anybody else. He seems to have this gift, so there is anger that develops. While Salieri doesn’t technically kill Mozart, his actions lead to Mozart’s death. He thwarts everything Mozart does. It points us to that realization that we may not directly do physical damage to someone, and yet we can do another kind—psychological, social, economic. There are ways we can get in the way of somebody else’s life.

Jesus seems to be noting that as he says, “Don’t hold onto your anger. Don’t even insult someone or swear at them.” That seems like a tall order in some respects. And yet, he is inviting us to think about how we express our anger.

The interesting thing about the word that Jesus uses for “anger” is that it comes from a root that can mean “wrath,” but the form that he’s using suggests that it’s something that has come home to roost. It’s set. It’s an anger that begins to build itself into our lives. It’s not just a momentary anger; it’s an anger that shapes our understanding of other people so that, perhaps, we have a group that we’re always angry with because they’re in the wrong.

It feels to me like what that does is begin to build walls between us. It’s the kind of set anger that feels so prevalent in our day and age. We have our own positions and

we're angry at those that don't share them. We separate ourselves into camps, building walls between us with our emotions or building walls that are real because we feel we can divide ourselves as people based on the otherness. We have some kind of concern or fear, or some kind of anger that can divide us, some worry that our lives will not be what we want them to be if we care for somebody else.

There's a way in which allowing this fear or anger can dash to pieces the relationships we have. Jesus is talking about something that has real consequences. He suggests that when we hold onto our anger, when we let it become set in our lives, when we begin to be able to talk about others in a derogatory way, we begin to dash our hopes of peace as well. Jesus invites us to recognize how we divide ourselves through our anger, through our concerns, through our struggles.

There's this interesting question that Paul brings up from listening to Jesus. What do we owe one another? What's our moral obligation to anybody else and what's theirs to us? It's easy to get going in life and begin to feel like I'm owed the kind of life I have. I deserve it. I deserve more attention, or I deserve more respect, or more whatever. I deserve to be heard.

We have been given a gift—a gift of life and a gift of grace. I don't know that I did anything to deserve either one of those things. Those are pure gifts, and we're invited to recognize that what we owe one another comes out of those gifts. What God has given us is the opportunity to share that grace.

When we begin to think about what it means to owe no one anything but love, we can take some interesting twists. Does that mean we always have to agree? I don't think so. Does it mean we always do what somebody else wants us to do? No, I don't think so. Do we let somebody else direct our lives because we love them? No. We come at this as a loved child of God trying to care for someone else, to see who they are and what their needs are, but we're not responsible for solving all their problems. We're there to care and walk beside and to help and to encourage. Love is not being run over. Love is being present, sometimes standing up. Love is a different approach than anger. It's a realization that we've been given a gift that we don't deserve and that we can share that gift with everyone.

There's a hope that we can love our neighbor as ourselves and that when we struggle to appreciate other folks, we can begin to notice them and we can begin to understand it ourselves. That's an incredible statement that loving our neighbors as ourselves is fulfilling the law. It's the beginning of recognizing that what God is calling us to is caring for everyone around us.

Sometimes that idea of caring for others can begin to feel like we just pay attention to what their needs are. The struggle I want to bring up is this: There are times when there are justice and injustice. A group may say, "You don't love us if you don't let us do this." But if it's not something that allows for everyone, if it's not something that brings justice and equity into the world, if it's not something that enables everyone to

have life and life abundantly, then perhaps injustice is being done and there are reasons to have some arguments and some struggles. But generally, our hope is that when we look around and try to love one another, we care for each one, encourage each to live into the gifts God has given them, and not to focus on my own needs so much that I somehow hinder somebody else's ability to live and have life abundantly.

Jesus is inviting us to recognize the struggle we have with anger, with trying to solve our problems by forcing another to do something different. We can hold onto our anger and can get it set into our lives. We can break our relationships because of it. We can create the walls around our groups so we can just focus on our own little group. What we have found over and over in the world today is that we can't really do that anymore. It's very hard to be able to just have an individual life that doesn't have any effect on anybody else, or anyone else's life has an effect on us.

As we live in a world where we begin to recognize the fullness of our interrelationships, we're invited to care about them and to care about each other. Not to dash anyone, but to bring the opportunities, the encouragement, the support, the love for one another. I think that's an incredible statement that Paul can say when we love one another, when we love our neighbor as ourselves, then we are fulfilling the laws and the commandments. That's the invitation of our faith as we follow Christ. As we live into the grace God has given us it is that opportunity to share it with everyone and to be God's people. Amen.