

### “Blessed Atonement”

My mother subscribes to a magazine that each month offers a page of jokes, quotations and sayings. She saves them and sends them to me sometimes with her own notations about which sayings she found compelling or helpful. For example, “The shortest distance between two points is always under construction.” (Rebecca McClanahan) or “Never go to a doctor whose office plants have died.” (Erma Bombeck) “There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.” (Oscar Wilde)

Anyone who has bought or sold a home knows the most popular aphorism among realtors is, “Location, location, location.” I think for biblical passages the rule is “context, context, context.” When we take a passage out of context we lose significant clues for understanding its meaning.

Today’s passage from the Gospel of Matthew is a case in point. What we heard today is another portion of The Sermon on the Mount. Over the past two Sundays we have heard other sections of The Sermon on the Mount. Two weeks ago it was the most famous portion which we call the Beatitudes. Last week was a continuation in which Jesus tells us that we are salt of the earth and light for the world. He also tells us that he did not come to abolish the Law of Moses but to fulfill it. The hard part for us to hear was that if our righteousness did not exceed that of the Scribes and the Pharisees we would “never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

The Good News in that passage was gained by looking at its context. It was then that we realized that Jesus says the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees is hollow. A truly righteous person is not an arbiter of God’s commandments, but one who helps to make other people’s lives more savory like salt. A truly righteous person is less concerned with the literal meaning of the Law and more concerned with enlightening one another as to the spirit of the Law. What’s more, if each of us is “Blessed” in some way then we are to treat each other as a blessed, and to share our blessings with one another.

It is in this same context that today’s passage begins. Having said that the righteousness of the Pharisees and Scribes is hollow, Jesus speaks about the difference between the letter and spirit of the Law. His first example is quite jarring. His listeners knew the sixth commandment was, “Thou shall not commit murder,” but Jesus says it is not only murder that kills. Anger to the point of murder, anger that becomes spite, or anger that becomes a grudge also kills. This level of anger may not kill bodies, but it kills relationships. This level of anger destroys hearts. It destroys the one who is angry as well as the recipient of the anger. I know I have hurt some people in my life and even in this church when my frustration has boiled over in anger. Jesus says that if our offerings to God are to be true to God’s commandments we need to cleanse ourselves of the anger by making peace with those we have hurt.

That is powerful and convicting. Jesus is saying that holding unresolved anger is a liability, insulting someone is a liability, and even calling someone a name as simple as “fool,” is a mark upon our soul. Those simple, common

everyday emotions are not innocent. As much as they hurt another they also poison our soul. His solution is rather simple, go to the one with whom we are at odds and apologize. Jesus is telling his listeners that a sincere apology can cleanse our souls and the soul of the one with whom we are in conflict.

This was not a new idea even in Jesus' day. This is the basis of Yom Kippur the Jewish Day of Atonement. What Jesus says is that we need to do it as soon as possible rather than waiting until a specified day to atone. The anger that we carry around is so poisonous that we need to get it out before it festers and grows. Alcoholics Anonymous sees this as so important that it is the eighth of the twelve steps in that program.

Indeed, the Church takes this so seriously that within every Eucharist services we have the opportunity to atone. First we make the confession of our sins which includes the phrase "by not loving our neighbor as ourselves." Then once we have been absolved of our sins we pass the peace. Some people think that the passing of the peace is a mini-social hour. I have been in churches where people use this time to catch up with people. That is not the point at all. The point is to do what Jesus tells us to do in today's Gospel. It is to put ourselves in right relationship with each other. We do not have to shake every hand to do that just by sharing the God's peace with those near us we are doing so with everyone. Although, I would say if there is someone in particular we need to make amends to we should seek that person out. It is not necessary in that moment to offer an apology that can wait. But it is good to begin the process of healing by offering your hand, or a hug, or even the kiss of peace. When we do so we put ourselves in right relationship with one another. We are healing the hurts known and unknown, so that we may make our offering and come to God in a state of peace and love.

Similarly, in the remaining portions of the passage Jesus is holding us to a higher standard than just the letter of the law. Whether it is adultery, divorce, or swearing an oath we are to be called to a higher way of living. I do not think that Jesus said these things to make us anxious or neurotic. That is not his goal. Constant worry, as he says in another passage<sup>1</sup> is no good for anyone. Rather we are to be mindful of whose we are, how God has blessed us, and who God has called us to be.

We are blessed in a myriad of ways even when we mourn or are persecuted. Additionally, we are the salt and savor of life and a light to all who live in darkness. When we are wrapped up in anger, lustfulness, or any other distraction we are distancing ourselves from all that is holy. Jesus reminds us to return to that which is life-giving and righteous.

The faith tradition in which I grew up taught me that when I failed in this way I needed to feel miserable and beat myself up. There is nothing like a good bout of self-flagellation to make us better people went that thinking. I have since learned that accomplishes only one thing. That is to make myself feel

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:25-34

The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur  
Emmanuel Episcopal Church  
Middleburg, VA

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A  
8:00 & 10:30 a.m.  
February 12, 2023

worthless and depressed. Brother Laurence<sup>2</sup> one of my favorite teachers of spirituality, tells us that when we fail what is important is to recognize that failure and return to God. When Jesus tells us to tear our offending eye out or cut off our offending hand he is trying to get our attention about the severity of the error we are making. Jesus does not want us maimed; remember Jesus is a healer. He wants us to know that love is what heals. Love is what God calls us to. Our fits of anger, lust, selfishness, and swearing need a remedy. The remedy is our blessing.

When we remember that we are blessed we can turn away from our mistakes to bless others. We have the power and the means to overcome our insecurities, prejudices, blindness, willfulness, ego, and fear. We can, by putting these admonitions into context, not feel scolded and shamed by Jesus but reminded that we are blessed and a blessing. We are reminded that we can be a Beatitude to one another, because we are salt of the earth and the light to the world.

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Practice of the Presence of God*