

“The Context of Blessing”

Aphorisms are popular in most cultures. They are often words of wisdom that are intended to succinctly provide information in a memorable way. The Book of Proverbs is an example of a collection of such sayings. Aphorisms can be the familiar such as “The early bird gets the worm” or the less familiar “Words that soak into your ears are whispered, not yelled.” My mother subscribes to some magazines 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.

We have a number of realtors in our congregation. What is the most common aphorism among realtors? Yes, “Location, location, location.” While it is not as common I coined an aphorism for preachers inspired by that. When studying the Bible the rule is “context, context, context.” When we take a passage out of context we lose significant clues to understanding its meaning.

For the passage today it is very important to realize it is part of the Sermon on the Mount. This passage comes after the Beatitudes, Jesus’ eight “blessed are” statements. It directly follows the passage we heard last week wherein Jesus tells us that we are salt 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 know the commandment, “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. 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 others.

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 “You 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 simple apology can cleanse our souls and the soul of the one with who we are in conflict.

This not a new idea, it 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 Yom Kippur 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 the program.

Indeed, the Church takes this so seriously that within every Eucharist services we have the opportunity to atone. The first thing that comes to mind might be the Confession, but it is not that; although it is very important to confess these mistakes to God. Rather it is the passing of the peace. The passing of the peace is not a mini-social hour. The point is to offer God's peace in the form of a handshake or hug or kiss, and by so doing to make ourselves 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 passage¹ does no one any good. 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 that the world offers Jesus reminds us to take ourselves back to God.

Brother Laurence² one of my favorite teachers of spirituality, tells us that when we are distracted from our practice we are not to beat ourselves up, but simply return our focus 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. Indeed, remember Jesus heals. 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 Beatitude to one another, salt and light to the world.

¹ Matthew 6:25-34

² *The Practice of the Presence of God*