

## “A Legacy of Kindness”

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The Bible is a library of 66 widely varied books, written over the span of 1100 years, containing some of the world’s most profound and lovely teaching, and occasionally some befuddling and disturbing passages. For me, this piece from Matthew 5 falls into the latter category. Listen carefully to the Word of God.

Matthew 5:21-23    <sup>21</sup>“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’  
<sup>22</sup> But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.

The word of the Lord???

Oh, good grief. Let’s set that off to the side for a moment.

Earlier in this chapter, Jesus gave us the beatitudes, including “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Some of you have heard me explain in previous sermons that the word “meek” is perhaps a puzzling translation for us; that “meek” in this case does not mean to be Casper Milquetoast and let everyone walk all over you. We know this because at one point Moses is described as “the meekest man in the Bible.” One of the definitions of a meek person (biblically) is one who is never angry at the wrong time, but always angry at the right time. The wrong time to be angry is when there is some small slight against us. The right time to be angry is when someone else is being treated unjustly.

We think of Jesus and what is called “the cleansing of the Temple.” Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the animal sellers who had set up shop at the temple in the Courtyard of the Gentiles. These people were cheating the poor, and making it impossible for the Gentiles to worship at the

temple. Jesus accompanied his actions with these words, “It is written, ‘My house is to be a house of prayer for all nations, yet you have made it into a den of robbers.’” Jesus clearly was angry.

But yet a few verses later he tells his followers, “If you are angry you will be liable to judgment.”

So what’s the deal?

I don’t know.

But I’ve thought about this a lot. Here’s my best guess.

In verses 22-23 of Matthew 5 Jesus is recorded as saying, “...I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you ‘insult’ a brother or sister... (Literally ‘if you say *Raca* to them; *raca* is an obscure term of utter contempt, which means metaphorically to spit on someone) you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. “You fool” means to say that the other is a worthless person.

Now, Jesus didn’t do any of that. In driving the animals and the moneychangers out of the Temple Courtyard, Jesus was expressing righteous indignation. But nowhere do we read that he called the people names, that he said they were worthless. He condemned their actions, not their personhood. Out of his righteous indignation he went into action to bring about justice. But as far as we can tell, he did not harbor animosity in his heart.

As I have started to do, that is, harbor animosity, despite my best efforts.

Most Sundays I am primarily preaching to myself...and I just let you all listen in on things with which I am wrestling. That is especially true today.

Every single day the news gets worse and worse. The hatred and lies spewing from the highest levels of government, and spawning ever more vile

manifestations. In response, I have started to think thoughts I have never considered before.

Many years ago, in the church I was serving, the congregation's Peacemaking Task Force held a book study of Swiss physician Paul Tournier's classic, *The Violence Within*. It's a very interesting consideration of the capability and propensity toward violence of even the best of us. At the time, I was in my twenties and I was even less self-aware than I am now. I had trouble resonating with the book. I found it quite unimaginable that I could possibly act in violent ways. However...

Now, before your imaginations go wild, let me assure you that indeed I have not, since a very brief fistfight in tenth grade phy ed class, actually struck anyone in anger.

And I actually hadn't thought of that book, *The Violence Within*, in many years. But I think of it a lot these days, as I have become more and more aware of the violence bubbling up within my own heart. And the message I take away from it is this:

*Bill, be careful, or you will become the thing you hate.*

Arlene Jullie forwarded to me this week a daily devotional from the wonderful Roman Catholic priest and author Richard Rohr. It was a word from God to me. I pass it along to you.

**Becoming Pure in Heart**, Tuesday, October 30, 2018

We can't risk walking around with a negative, resentful, gossipy, critical mind, because then we won't be in our true force field. We won't be usable instruments for God. That's why Jesus *commanded* us to love. It's that urgent. It's that crucial...

If we walk around with hatred all day, morally we're just as much killers as the one who pulls the trigger. We can't live that way and not be destroyed from within. Yet, for some reason, many Christians have thought it acceptable to think

and feel hatred, negativity, and fear. The evil and genocide of both World War I and World War II were the result of decades of negative, resentful, and paranoid *thinking and feeling* among even good Christian people.

Jesus tells us not to harbor hateful anger or call people names in our hearts like “fool” or “worthless person” (Matthew 5:22). If we’re walking around all day thinking, “What idiots!” we’re living out of death, not life. If that’s what we think and feel, that’s what we will be—death energy instead of life force. We cannot afford even inner disconnection from love. How we live in our hearts is our real and deepest truth.

In Matthew 5:44, Jesus insists that we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. –Richard Rohr

I think all of this is what the author of Ephesians meant in writing, “Be angry, but do not sin.”

Here’s an analogy. I long ago replaced all of our incandescent lights at home with LED lights. But our dining room light fixture uses little halogen light bulbs and only recently have they come out with LED bulbs for it. So this weekend I delightedly replaced the halogens with LEDs. But before I could remove the old bulbs I had to turn off the chandelier for a while...because the old bulbs were so hot. Halogen and incandescent bulbs create a lot of heat in order to produce a little light. And that’s what I’ve been doing lately, creating heat rather than light, more stewing and muttering than positive actions. LEDs are the opposite. They produce light without wasting much energy at all on heat. So let us use our outrage to motivate us to counter hatred not through negative emotions of our own, but through loving actions.

That’s not easy. It’s really hard not to have those negative emotions. We probably can’t do it on our own. That’s where prayer comes in. To pray for our enemies. To pray for ourselves.

Friends, in the name of Jesus, let us not respond to hatred with more hatred and heat, but with love and light.

Amen?