

## **The Sixth Sunday in Epiphanytide**

**Deuteronomy 30:11-20; Psalm 119:1-8; Matthew 5:21-37; I Corinthians 3:1-9**

**Deuteronomy 30:11-20** is perhaps the most dramatic statement within the covenant renewal ceremony that occurred on the shore of the Jordan River as Israel made ready to cross the river and begin its conquest of the Promised Land. For forty years, Israel had wandered in the wilderness as a generation that could be taken out of Egypt but couldn't take Egypt out of its own psyche; (so that they could not become a people who could build a new nation – only escape from an old one). There they would become a generation that had to die off and be replaced by a new generation hardened in the desert. Now, they were finally ready to enter into Canaan. So Moses gathered them just before they crossed the Jordan River and led them through a ceremony where they recommitted themselves to the covenant made between God and Israel at Mount Sinai and in which Joshua was appointed by Moses as Israel's new leader. Moses would remain behind in the wilderness, where he would die.

Deuteronomy 30:11-20 is perhaps the most dramatic portion of the covenant renewal ceremony. In this portion of this renewal ceremony, Moses places a challenge upon the people. He begins, "Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us, so that we may hear it and observe it.' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us, so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe" (Deut. 30:11-14).

What is the covenant (or "commandment", as this text puts it) to which Moses is calling the Israelites to commit themselves? Well, it's not hard to understand. This lesson states, "It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us and get it for us?' Nor is it across the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us?'" In other words, this covenant that God wants Israel to renew with Him is not obscure or far distant. You don't have to travel to heaven or across the sea to understand it. It's not complicated. It doesn't require a Ph.D. It is simply this:

"Love the Lord your God, walk in his ways, and observe all his commandments, decrees and ordinances" (Deut. 30:16). That's it! That's the covenant.

In other words, what Moses is declaring is that God already loves you, and the sign of his love for you is that he took your forefathers and mothers out of Egypt, rescued them from Pharaoh, protected them in the wilderness and is now bringing you into a new land "flowing with milk and honey". God already loves you, and now he asks something back. He wants you to love him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and he wants you to "obey the statutes, decrees and ordinances" that God has given to Israel.

But what are those "statutes, decrees and ordinances"? Consistently throughout the book of Deuteronomy, the author keeps referring to the "statutes, decrees and ordinances" that are to be observed by the Israelites as the means by which the covenant is to be lived out in everyday life and in the life of the nation. But what are those "statutes, decrees and ordinances"?

The book of Deuteronomy is divided into four parts. The first part, chapters one through four, is an introduction to the book in which the story of Israel from Red Sea to their arrival 40 years later at the Jordan River is presented. In this introduction, the author lays out God's choice of Israel, his deliverance of them, and God's continued protection and guidance of Israel in the wilderness as they are being prepared to found a new nation in the Promised Land.

The second is a detailed statement of the actual covenant made between God and Israel at Mount Sinai (chapters 5-11). The covenant is first summarized in the Ten Commandments (ch. 5), and is then examined more carefully by looking at the religious, political and economic systems that Israel is supposed to have in order to carry out that covenant in both public and private life (chs. 6-8). Finally, this second portion deals with what Israel's history thus far teaches all Israel will be the inevitable outcome if Israel chooses to break this covenant (chs. 9-10) or to observe this covenant (ch. 11).

The third section is the presentation of the "statutes and ordinances" which apply the covenant and its "commandments" to the everyday public and private functioning of Israel (chs. 12-28). That section is then followed by the conclusion of the book through both Israel's covenant renewal ceremony and the consecration of Joshua as their new leader and the death of Moses (chs. 29-34). Today's scripture lesson is part of that covenant renewal ceremony.

Let us look more carefully at the third section, the "statutes, decrees and ordinances" that Israel is to obey as the concrete means of living out the covenant in both everyday personal and national life. The author of Deuteronomy first presents the four categories of "statutes and ordinances". There are, first, laws and regulations laid out for enabling the religious system of Israel to enhance each person's and the nation's relationship with God (chs. 12:1-22; 14:1-2; 16:1-17; 16:21-17:7; ch. 18). Second, there are statutes and decrees dealing with the political system that Israel is to have in order to be practicing a politics of justice for all its inhabitants, regardless of their position in society (16:18-20; 17:8-20; 19:1-21:17). Third, there are ordinances regarding how the economics of the nation is to be practiced so that there is an equitable distribution of wealth, riches are not hoarded by a select few and poverty is eliminated from the nation (14:3-15; 24:5-10; ch. 26). Fourth, there are laws presented which equally apply to the operation of all three systems, dealing primarily with people's relationships to each other (21:22-25:4, 11-19). Finally, in this third section, the author presents the central role of the prophet as God's means for holding primarily the religious, political and economic systems and, to a lesser degree, the people of Israel accountable for the practice of this covenant laid out in Deuteronomy's "statutes, decrees and ordinances".

Therefore, when the author states the covenant as "loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing all his commandments, decrees and ordinances" (30:16), what he means is that the covenant that is based on God's eternal love for Israel consists of the call to Israel to love God and to live both their national life and their individual lives in working for justice for all, equitably sharing wealth so that poverty is eliminated and sharing a dynamic relationship with God. In other words, the covenant is for Israel to love God and to love their neighbor as themselves!

Now what's so hard about understanding this? Love God. Love your neighbor. And who is your neighbor? The poor. The powerless. The foreigner. The widowed and orphaned. And how are you to love them? Share your wealth with the poor. Work with the powerless so they can deal successfully with their own issues. Welcome the foreigner and provide him a place among your people. Advocate for the widowed and orphaned. This is the covenant made between God and Israel at Mount Sinai that God (and Moses) are now calling the Israelites to renew and to pledge themselves to afresh – as they stand at the Jordan River ready to go into the Promised Land and claim it as their own.

So the choice is really simple, Israel. “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods, and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob (30:15-20).

“I, the Lord God, have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (30:19)! That's the Old Testament covenant. It is a covenant of interdependence between God and Israel and between the nation and each individual Israelite. If we obey it, it is a covenant that can transform our city, our nation and ourselves into humanity as God meant humanity to be. And if we choose to ignore it, then we will experience life as hell!

As we examine the nature of the covenant between God and Israel, it is important – in fact very important – that we acknowledge that the old perspective that the Old Testament was a book of the Law and the New Testament the book of grace is just plain wrong. It is a vast oversimplification and a misreading of the Hebrew Bible to perceive it as such. The danger inherent in recognizing that the requirement for Israel in the Old Testament covenant that they were to love God and love their neighbor is to perceive that love as conditional. That is, it is very easy to fall into the trap of saying that God called Israel to love God and their neighbor. And to the degree that they would so live out that love would determine the degree to which they would be embraced and blessed by God. That, of course, is a doctrine of salvation by works (that is, it's my responsible actions toward God and neighbor that determines whether or not God will accept me) – and interpreting the Old Testament covenant this way allows one to differentiate between the Old and New Testaments as being, respectively, testaments of Law and grace.

But the facts are otherwise. You simply can't read the Old Testament that way and support such an interpretation with its own content. The emphasis throughout the Old Testament was that God had first covenanted with humanity (from Abraham on – see Genesis 15) to love them, and

because of that love, to rescue them from bondage. This is most clearly stated in Deuteronomy when the Mosaic author wrote, “It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deut. 7:7-8; also see Deut. 4:20-40; 6:10-18; 8:2-20). “There was nothing about you either in action or in intent that particularly commended you to God”, Moses is in essence saying. “In fact, you were “the fewest of all peoples” – the weakest, the least important or strategic of all people. In fact, you were slaves. But God “set his heart on you and chose you”. God “loved you”. And why does he love you and consequently, chooses you to be his people? God loves you because he chooses to love you! It is an entirely arbitrary decision on the part of God, because there is nothing about you that is more lovable than any other people; in fact, everything about you ought to receive God’s rejection. But God loved you and “brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the hand of Pharaoh” – simply because God chose to do so!”

Thus, the Old Testament, as much as is true of the New Testament, is built upon God’s freely given, totally irrational love for God’s people. As a result, God’s choice of these people is equally freely given and irrational. God chooses Israel because God loves Israel. And God loves Israel because God chooses Israel. God loves Israel because it is in the nature of God to love unconditionally!

What, then, is to be Israel’s and each Israelite’s response? That which would most please God is that Israel would return God’s love by loving their neighbor – their physical neighbors, those in need and vulnerable around them, and the neighbor nations around their nation. The appropriate response to God is to love God back by loving God’s creation and working for their empowerment. That is the completion of the covenant cycle – in gratitude, to seek to respond to God as God has acted toward us. But God’s liberating and redeeming action toward us is not conditioned upon our action toward him. Rather, God’s loving action toward us occurs because it is God’s nature to so act toward his creation, irrespective of their response. That is the foundation of Old Testament theology.

Thus, the Old Testament is not differentiated from the New Testament because it is Law as opposed to grace. Both testaments are covenants of grace (the word “testament” is a synonym for the word “covenant”). The difference between them is simply the presence of Jesus in the New Testament. That is what separates the two testaments – a person, not a saving principle!

**Psalm 119:1-8.** Psalm 119 actually is a collection of 22 psalms, all of which deal with a celebration of the Torah, the Law of Israel. In its entirety, it is 176 verses long. Psalm 119 follows a strict writing discipline. Each of its psalms begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet (so that it is an acrostic) and each psalm is eight lines long. The psalm selection for today is the first of the 22 psalms, and thus begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *aleph* (or “a”). Most of the lines follow the pattern of a truth being stated in a pithy manner, followed by an additional thought on that truth that enriches the original truth. Thus, for example, the psalmist states the truth, “I delight in the way of your decrees”, and then follows it

with the enrichment “as much as in all riches” (119:14). In examining this psalm, I will print it line by line, so that one can see how it is following the writing discipline of the psalm. Today’s psalm is the first (*aleph*), and its eight lines are as follows:

“Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord.  
Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart,  
Who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.  
You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.  
O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!  
Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.  
I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous ordinances.  
I will observe your statutes; do not utterly forsake me.”

Psalm 119 begins as does the first psalm of the Psalter. Psalm 1:1 initiates the Psalter with the words, “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, . . . but their delight is in the law of the Lord” and the beginning of this great psalm on the Torah begins, “Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord.” Both are proclaiming essentially the same thing – that happiness is found in both understanding and conforming one’s life to the obedience of “the law of the Lord”.

The word “happy” is a significant choice of words. It does not so much mean what the English word “happy” conveys (i.e., “joyful”, “ecstatic” or “cheerful”) as it means “blessed” (i.e., “to hallow”, “to approve” or “to prosper”). The idea being conveyed here is not that of one feeling pleased with his walking “in the law of the Lord” as it is that the very walking in the way of the Lord is blessing him or her. That is, one is enriched spiritually by the act of living life inundated by the law of the Lord.

The first three lines of Psalm 119 declare that one lives a blessed life by living it in conformity to the Torah. In other words, to live life consistently obeying the Torah brings to one a profound blessing upon one’s life; it is enriched beyond the imagination by living under such a discipline.

Lines 4 through 8 change the thrust of this passage. Moving beyond the perspective that one’s life is enriched by living in conformity with the Torah, the Psalmist now prays that he can consistently assume that responsibility. He prays for God’s assistance in his keeping of the precepts of the Torah. Thus, the psalmist recognizes that fully and consistently living one’s life in obedience to the Torah takes more than human will and determination. It requires divine support, and thus one must stay close to the Author of the Torah if he is, indeed, to consistently keep that Torah. Thus, it is the grace of God that makes obeying the Law possible!

**Matthew 5:21-37.** In last Sunday’s gospel lesson, immediately previous to today’s lesson, Jesus had affirmed the importance and centrality of the Torah to the formation and implementation of Israel’s national life and each Israelite’s private life. He has made his loyalty to the Torah clear. He stated that, in the obedience of the Torah, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20).

Now, in today's lesson, we see why Jesus made such an emphasis on the authority of the Law. Without his having stressed the Law's centrality to the shaping of the community of Israel, it would be very easy to interpret today's lesson as a deep criticism of the Torah, as if Jesus found it wanting. But if one approaches what he says about Torah in this lesson from the perspective of Jesus' perception of Torah as central to the formation of the life of Israel, a different interpretation ensues.

In today's passage, Jesus quotes the Torah four times (and in the ensuing scripture two more times), and then states, "But I say to you" and then gives a new law on the same subject. Thus, he says:

- ? "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient time, "You shall not murder". But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment" (5:31-32).
- ? "You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery". But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (vss. 27-28).
- ? "It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce". But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery" (vss. 31-32).
- ? "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient time, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord". But I say to you, Do not swear at all. Instead, let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No No"" (vss. 33-34a, 37).
- ? "You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer, but turn the other (cheek) also" (vss. 38-39).
- ? "You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy". But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (vss. 43-44).

Before we begin to get into an examination of the first four of these commandments made by Jesus (the final two will be considered in next Sunday's gospel lesson), there are two exceedingly important observations we need first to make.

First, Jesus does not abrogate these laws. In his quotation of each commandment, Jesus does not dismiss or "disrespect" that law. What Jesus does is make the law harder! In essence, in each statement, Jesus says, "This law is not hard enough. It is absolutely true! But it is not comprehensive enough." And then, what Jesus does is to take that law and make it harder! He doesn't invalidate the law; rather he confirms it. But he goes beyond it, saying that its statement is insufficient if a true righteousness, a righteousness "exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees" is to be practiced. Thus, for example, he states that the law, "You shall not commit adultery" is absolutely true, but it is also an inadequate statement of the way sexual relationships between a man and a woman in Jesus' kingdom should be practiced. For to look at a woman with lust and the desire to sexually have her is as much using her in your mind as an object for your self-gratification as it is to rape her. You have not adequately kept the law, "You shall not commit adultery". More importantly, you have continued to perceive her as an object at your disposal rather than a human being with whom you relate; until you bring your thought-life

under the authority of Christ, you are still breaking the commandment, “You shall not commit adultery”!

Second, Jesus places himself in an authoritative position above that of the law. And it would be that action on Jesus’ part that would make him so offensive to the scribes, Pharisees and priests of Israel. They saw the Law as supreme. Jesus saw it as God’s vehicle for forming Israel into God’s society; therefore, as the Son of God, Jesus could both critique that law and develop that law beyond its formal statement. In this way, Jesus could move Israel away from a legalistic interpretation of the law that was concerned with its every “jot and tittle”, and could move it toward what the law was intended to be – a means of building Israel into the relational society (relationship of Israel both toward God and each other) that God intended it to be. But in doing this, Jesus was doing what no other rabbi would have done in his time – declaring that the commandments of the law were inadequate statements that needed to be restated by Jesus in order for them to be truly correct. And that attitude and action made Jesus an authority over the law – a thoroughly unacceptable action that even the high priest could not assume!

Now to an examination of Jesus’ first four statements about the Law.

“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; 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. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly, I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny” (5:21-26).

The first three commands of Jesus (5:21-26; 5:27-30; 5:31-32) deal with moral or private responses to people; this is evidenced not only by their content but by the fact that each examination of a command is shorter than the one before (because there is less necessity to explain the moral nature of these commands). The final three commands of Jesus (5:33-37; 5:38-42; 5:43-48) are political or public responses to people, dealing with the ordering of public life. Followers of Jesus are involved in both a private and in a public world, acting morally and politically. Therefore, the way one chooses to act in both worlds either advances or detracts from the building of the kingdom of God; consequently, think and act carefully so that you are living out a higher law that is consistent with the obedience of the Torah but is moving far beyond it in contributing to the building of the kingdom of God.

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient time”, Jesus said. This is a significant statement. The inadequacy of the law that Jesus is about to expose, Jesus is saying, is not due to the way his contemporaries have chosen to interpret it or to “water it down” so that it will be acceptable (this is a particularly important point on what Jesus will say in 5:31-32 about divorce). Jesus’ issue with this law is with that law itself, not a later interpretation of it! “Those of ancient time” are the lawmakers themselves, those who first spoke these laws to Israel at

Mount Sinai. Therefore, Jesus is both making it clear that his issue is with this law itself, and in doing so, he is claiming his authority to differ with this law.

The law with which Jesus is differing in this instance is Exodus 20:13, a law found in Israel's most holy document, the Ten Commandments! "You shall not murder", the Decalogue states (Ex. 20:13). Now let us see what Jesus does with this law.

"But I say to you", Jesus next says. This statement, "But I say to you", Jesus will use in the introduction of his alternative in all six statements. So what I write here about this revolutionary statement applies in all six instances.

There are two important points that need to be made about the audacious statement, "But I say to you". First, the Greek word translated "I" that Jesus uses here is the word "*ego*", with all that word implies in English as well as Greek! In Greek, "I" is often not stated directly but is understood. Here, it is stated directly. It is, in Greek, "in your face"! It would be either exceedingly liberating or extremely offensive to the person reading this gospel account for the first time in the first or second centuries A.D. It is emphatic, decisive, even defiant and offensive! "But I say to you!" F. Dale Bruner, who has written perhaps the most penetrating commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, states of this use of the "I":

"Jesus' 'I say to you' adds no supporting authorities, no argument, no reasons, no justification, not even any Scripture, but remains all alone, as if by itself sufficient. Jesus is in effect relocating all religious and ethical authority – and here is the real contrast in all the antitheses – from the Torah to himself. From now on Jesus is Lord even over Scripture. Jesus does not *displace* Scripture. But now Jesus does assume messianic place *over* Scripture as Scripture's authorized interpreter".<sup>1</sup>

The other use of Greek that is important to note in this six-times repeated statement of Jesus, "But I say to you" is that the "you" is plural. That is, it should be translated "you-all" or "you folks". It is "you" corporate, not "you" singular. It is not referring to an individual. It is referring to the entire church, to the Body of Christ. This is an interpretation and an enrichment of the Law being given by Jesus to his followers, not to the world at large. It is modeling for us how we, as the Christian community around the world, are meant to live in our relationships with each other and with the world – both in our private moral lives and in our public political, economic and religious life-together.

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment" (5:21-22). Jesus is declaring that it is not simply the elimination of a person by killing him that he opposes; what he opposes is any anger that we have towards others that alienates them from us. But what does Jesus mean by "anger"?

The Greek word that is translated here as "anger" is the word, *orgizomenos* (from which we get the English word, "orgy"). It is a present participle. This word implies a continuing state of anger, an ongoing "orgy" of anger, an anger that will not forgive or which one refuses to get

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<sup>1</sup> F. Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 208.

over. It is not referring to a brief flash of anger with which one deals rather quickly; there is another Greek word for that kind of sudden anger, *thymos*.

That this is a correct reading of Jesus' intent in this passage is corroborated by the next two lines. "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" (vs. 22b). This sentence is not using two words as synonyms to parallel the sentence before it – the words "insult" and "fool" (to seemingly parallel "anger"). In other words, Jesus isn't saying the same thing in three different ways. Instead, Jesus is saying three distinct things.

In your treatment of your neighbor, you are not to be caught up in an orgy of anger toward him, nor are you to insult him or call him a fool. The Greek word that is translated "insult" is the word *rhaka* which means "stupid" or "idiot". It questions the mental competence of the neighbor. The word "fool" is *more*, which means "renegade" or even, in American slang, "jerk"! It is not referring so much to a person's mental capacity as it is to his moral competence. It doesn't mean "foolish", in terms of the inability to think clearly. It means "fool", in terms of acting with contempt toward others. Thus, what Jesus is doing here is tracing an inevitable process: unresolved anger leads to a flippant dismissal of people and then to contempt of them; thus it treats the person or situation with which you are angry as an object to be manipulated or a person to be eliminated.

Glen Stassen writes of the use of these three words ("anger", "idiot", and "renegade"), "Jesus' teaching on anger is a realistic diagnosis of a vicious cycle. If we are honest and realistic about ourselves, we know that we all get angry now and then. We know that stewing in it, continuing to live in anger, is a mechanism of temptation that leads to alienation from God and neighbor, to a desire to insult and dominate or even be violent, and therefore to destruction and judgment. Jesus realistically diagnoses a vicious cycle that leads to judgment and destruction. It is like a doctor's diagnosis of a tumor that will lead to death if it is not removed."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, a better translation of Jesus' statement would be "If you remain angry (or nurse a grudge) with a brother or sister". The anger against which Jesus is speaking is what we call in community organizing, "hot anger", an anger which is never assuaged but eats one alive; this is to be differentiated from organizing's "cold anger" which becomes an important motivation for sustaining the effort for social justice, a "long obedience in the same direction".

Jesus exhibits in this scripture a profound understanding of both the destructive nature and the positive nature of anger. One can allow one's anger to destroy all that is good in one. But one can also use anger to build the depth of relationships upon which relational power is based. And that occurs when you allow the people's pain to become your pain! And that means allowing the anger and frustration of the people to connect with your anger!

Christians have trouble with anger. We tend to think of anger as inappropriate for Christians, because we believe that we ought to be loving and caring. But anger is absolutely essential for

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<sup>2</sup> Stassen, Glen H., *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), p. 66.

bringing about change. And such anger has to be real both for the people and for the organizer, community worker and/or pastor.

To understand the nature of anger, we need to recognize that the Norse root for the English word, anger, is actually the word “grief”! Authentic anger is the process of grieving over the injustice our people are facing, and connecting that injustice with the pain we have experienced in our own lives. All of us have experienced injustice in our lives when we were dominated, oppressed or exploited in ways that diminished our sense of self-worth and respect. Those incidents may be overwhelming (such as Israel’s oppression under Egyptian slavery) or may seem trivial to someone else (like being made to clean up someone else’s mess at summer camp) – but it is still injustice to us that made us feel less of a human being. Our response may have been rage or tears or frustration or grief – but all of these are simply manifestations of anger. Anger is an essential part of human life, and to deny it is for us to deny our humanity!

As I stated earlier, organizers are fond of differentiating between “hot anger” and “cold anger”. But what do they mean by these two terms? Hot anger is the immediate response of anger one feels to an unjust situation – it is literally a flush of heat! If you respond to that flush of hot anger, your response will tend to be immediate, visceral and not thought through. It will, therefore, likely be destructive. Its greatest danger is that, if such anger is unresolved and allowed to accumulate, it will gradually become more and more destructive *within* you, not to the person or situation that awakened that anger!

Cold anger, on the other hand, is anger that is nurtured, that is allowed to ferment inside of us in almost an objective sort of way as we examine the injustice in a cognitive, reasoned way. In that greater reflection, we will decide whether it is in our best interest to respond to that injustice, and if so, what would be the most productive way of responding that will accomplish the greatest benefit.

When we say after we have responded out of hot anger, “I wish I would have said . . .”, we are actually saying, “I wish I had allowed my anger to cool down so that I could have spoken in a way that would have gotten the results I wanted to get”.

When Nehemiah, for example, first heard of the plight of his brother and sister Jews thousands of miles away in Jerusalem, he likely felt hot anger. But he gave himself time to reflect upon it while continuing to talk to other Jews coming to Susa, so that, gradually, the problem shifted from being the Jew’s problem to becoming Nehemiah’s problem, as well (Neh. 1:1-21).

Paul the Apostle, who understood anger very well, commands us, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil” (Eph. 4:26-27).

What Paul is telling us is that anger is a part of life, and therefore it is important to be in touch with your anger. What angers you about injustice is triggered by similar injustice you experienced in your past. Sharing your stories with others both grounds your anger (so that you understand it better) and connects you with others of similar experience or conviction. “Sinning” in your anger is to hold onto your anger as “hot anger”, letting it seethe inside you but not doing anything about it. To fan the anger within you but to do nothing about it, internalizes that anger (turns it inward upon yourself) and it thus does damage to you. Or the other alternative is to

refuse to acknowledge the anger you feel and thus submerge it inside you. To do so allows that anger (particularly if it is repeated many times) to move into your subconscious and to thus become personally destructive. To handle anger in these ways is to “sin”!

Paul continues, “Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” By that, he means that the way to deal with your anger is to share it with others and to find allies who feel the same way. If you “let the sun go down on your anger”, it will become a festering wound within you and will harm only you and those whom you love the most. But if you share that anger and the injustice that caused that anger, then you will begin to move in healthy ways to deal with that anger by organizing with others to remove the injustice that is the cause of that anger. In other words, what Paul is saying is that you must turn your “hot anger” into “cold”, deliberate anger that works towards a solution.

Finally, Paul concludes, “and do not make room for the devil.” You make “room for the devil” to control and to capture you by internalizing, denying or suppressing your anger. God’s way to deal with your anger, Paul is saying, is to join with others of common anger to work for the change of the situation or of the systems whose injustice caused the anger in the first place! Thus, when Jesus states in his first statement about the Law that anger which is not worked with is equal to the murdering of a person (perhaps even yourself), he is moving his listeners beyond unthinking action (“you shall not murder”) to learning how to use your internal responses to injustice (“anger”) to bring about positive action that can transform both your situation and that of others. In fact, this is the meaning of the remainder of this passage about reconciling with your brother before worshipping or settling with your neighbor over a legal matter. This is Jesus’ profound extension of the Law to all of life.

Jesus now moves to the second statement about the Law, still one of the three commands that deal with moral or private responses to people. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell” (5:27-30).

Again, Jesus uses the same formula. He quotes the Ten Commandments on adultery (Exodus 20:14), and thus states that true righteousness requires one to do more than to not have sexual intercourse with another person than one’s own spouse. Rather, he states that if a person has lustful thoughts about another person, he has already committed adultery with her in his mind. Thus, he is saying that a person must discipline his thought life and his imagination as much as his body. “Cut it off and throw it away”, he exaggerates, because “it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell”!

The first commentary on the commandments Jesus gave was to protect life (“Do not murder”). The second commentary Jesus gave was to protect marriage and the sexual relationship (“Do not commit adultery”). It is intriguing to note the actual Greek that Jesus uses in this statement. In the Greek, he does not say “looks at a woman with lust” (as the NRSV translates it) but says “looks at a woman in order to lust”. There is a subtle difference. Every person finds some other people attractive and even sexually stimulating. But it is what one can do with one’s being

attracted sexually to someone that can be destructive of both her and him. When one allows one's thoughts to dwell upon the sexuality of another and to play with the idea of possessing her or him, one has moved from simple attraction to the turning of that person into an object for one's own gratification. And that is true, whether or not the one who looks acts upon his thoughts or not. So once again, Jesus has moved from simple action to an awareness of the spiritual damage that one can do to one's self and to another by one's thoughts and intentions. As Martin Luther was credited in saying, "You can't stop birds from flying over your head, but you can stop them from building nests in your hair!"

The third and final command of Jesus dealing with moral or private responses to people is as follows: "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (5:31-32).

The law to which Jesus refers when he quotes the Scripture, is "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce" (Deut. 24:1, paraphrased). This is from the larger portion of Deuteronomy (24:1-14) that deals with divorce. This Deuteronomic law was, in reality, remarkably progressive for its time. Throughout the ancient Near East, a man could simply dismiss his marriage relationship and obligation to his wife by saying to her (even in a fit of anger), "I divorce you"! He would, in essence, simply abandon her and his family. If, later, he chose to do so, he could return to his spouse and reclaim her – even against her will.

In Israel, however, this regulation required a Jewish man to prepare a certificate of divorce which had to be legally affirmed; thus divorce was a much more deliberative act that took both time to accomplish and intentionality. Further, the certificate of divorce freed the woman from all legal obligations to the man, and would allow her to marry again. Even further, the providing of such a certificate released the woman from any further obligation to the man, so that if he returned and wanted to renew the relationship, she would not have to accede to his demand. Thus, this legislation was in reality a significantly progressive legislation that protected the rights of the woman.

Jesus, however, states that such a law – while remarkably progressive and protective – doesn't go far enough. He states that a man does not even have a right to divorce his wife for any other reason than adultery on her part. As long as she has remained faithful to him, the man has no right to divorce his wife on whatever other grounds he might state.

In other words, what Jesus is doing in his "but I say to you" is protecting the sanctity of marriage. It is not an estate in which a man may willy-nilly choose to enter and to depart. It is a lifelong commitment, for one cannot divorce in God's kingdom except upon the proven faithlessness of the wife. Thus, Jesus is protecting marriage.

In the fourth command made by Jesus, the emphasis changes from moral and private responses by people to political or public responses to people. In these three commands (Matt. 5:33-48), Jesus deals with the ordering of public life. How one chooses to act in his or her public life either advances or detracts from the building of the kingdom of God every bit as much as the way one acts in his or her private life. Jesus moves into this area of exploration by following the

same pattern of quoting the Torah and then taking that command and moving it to a deeper obedience through his words, “But I say to you”.

The fourth command concerns oaths. “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything more than that comes from the evil one” (5:33-37).

Jesus quotes once again from the Ten Commandments and its requirement, “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name” (Exod. 20:7). We most often interpret this command as saying that we should not swear at another person, using God’s name to do so. But that is a weak interpretation of the passage. In reality, what this passage is stating is that one should not secure an oath by using the name of God as his witness.

In the ancient world – both Near East and Roman – people would indicate the trustworthy and even binding nature of a promise or covenant they had made by swearing to their god (or, in the name of their god). That is, they indicated their honesty and/or commitment to this legal agreement by taking an oath in their god’s name (including Yahweh). In essence, the oath had repercussions in that – if the person were lying in making this oath – what he swore in front of his god would be used by that god to punish him. Therefore, to make an agreement with another and to seal it by saying “may God damn you” was not swearing at the person; it was meaning the oath quite literally. If you were lying in the making of this agreement, didn’t intend to obey it or even changed your mind later on and sought to get out of the agreement, then may God actually damn you to hell!

What Jesus is saying in this command is “Don’t take an oath in the name of Yahweh. Do not take an oath in the name of another god, particularly as you serve in a Roman courtroom (where you would have to take an oath in a god’s name when giving testimony) or as you make a Grecian, Egyptian or Roman business agreement. In fact, Jesus is saying, it is wrong for you to take any oath at all.

And why? Because you don’t have control over your life! You don’t have control over heaven, over the earth or over Jerusalem (three entities frequently used as the objects of oaths). You don’t finally even have control over yourself, because you can’t choose to make your hair white or black. Instead, all you have is the integrity of your word, of saying “yes” and then demonstrating by your faithful actions that you will do everything to keep your “yes”, or by saying “no” and being then faithful to that “no”. So, in your dealings in the political arena, the business world, or in the celebration of religions, become a person of “your word”, a person of integrity that needs no oath to demonstrate your sincerity. Instead, be a truly honest, trustworthy and upright person in all your public dealings with people. By doing so, you will be a witness to the remainder of the world of how a person acts who is a part of the community of shalom, the kingdom of God. And people will both trust you and honor your God because you are a person of integrity.

**I Corinthians 3:1-9.** In the Epistle Lesson for the Third Sunday after Epiphany, Paul had presented the primary problem that underlay the distress of the Corinthian Church. It was the division of the church into four competing parties – the Pauline party (the founders of the church), the Apollos party (those members loyal to the church’s second pastor who were of Corinth’s upper class), the Cephas party (those committed to keeping the gospel and church Jewish) and the Christ party (those unaccepted by any of the other three parties) (I Cor. 1:10-17).

Paul, in dealing with this division, will later present in both I (11:23-33) and II Corinthians (ch. 5), his full solution to such church conflict. The church can’t have a future in a city such as Corinth, Paul will later argue, if they perceive each other as the enemy. Such a church, with such an attitude, will surely die. Instead, if the Corinthian Christians are to become a powerful and transforming force in their city, they will need to overlook their differences, come together regularly in small, face-to-face meetings, not separate into cliques, share their joys, sorrows, concerns and life with each other, and in that context, celebrate the Eucharist together. In other words, they will need to build a relational church.

But in the meantime, Paul presents a penultimate – but powerful – argument. In today’s Epistle Lesson, Paul argues that their competition with and conflict between each other reveals them to be immature Christians, “infants in Christ”, who are “not ready for solid food”. “For you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh” revealing by your actions and words how childish you actually are?

Paul then moves to a most persuasive argument. “When one says, ‘I belong to Paul’, and another, ‘I belong to Apollos,’ are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe” (3:4-5).

Paul’s argument is brilliant. You know, he is in essence arguing, when you declare, ‘I am of Paul’ or ‘I am of Apollos’, neither Paul nor Apollos appreciates being so typecast. Nor does Cephas or Christ. We don’t appreciate being pulled into your silly competition!

Who, then, is Apollos, Paul, Cephas? We are nothing more than “servants through whom you came to believe”. Each of us played the strategic roles assigned to us by God. “I planted. Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each” (3:6-8).

So it is sheer foolishness for you Corinthians to argue for your party. For in doing so, you are committing violence against the entire intent of Paul and of Apollos. The job of one was to plant this church. The job of the other was to grow this church. Both did the job assigned to them, and did it faithfully. Whether one is a church planter and another is a church grower is irrelevant. God could care less what the calling is that each has been assigned. The only thing God cares about is whether each person has faithfully performed that calling. And in this case, that is exactly what has happened.

And what should be the result of such faithful “planting” and “watering”? The only thing that matters is that God is praised in Corinth, that God’s shalom community is built in Corinth, that people are drawn toward that community, and that Corinth begins to be reshaped into the society that God had created it to be as the result of the life, work and witness of that church in that city. That is the only thing that is important – not the building of your silly parties!

“Therefore, we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building” (3:9). It is not that Paul and Apollos and Cephas are in competition with each other. Rather, we are fellow servants, working as God’s teaching team in Corinth. And you, church, are “God’s field, God’s building” being made fertile and being built up into all that God intends you to be. So take your eyes off of your competition with each other, and place your eyes upon Jesus and upon becoming Jesus’ people in this city, working for this city’s transformation into the kingdom of God. And when you do that, then you are carrying out God’s call to you as a church and are on the road to becoming mature (rather than childish) Christians!

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