

Table Manners

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 5:17-26

“Anger is healthy,” say some psychologists. “Stuffing your anger can even lead to physical disease.” So, we must be living in a really healthy society. “Venting” instead of “stuffing” is everywhere: “road rage,” “spouse abuse,” and “child beating” are just some examples of the ways that people have chosen to “vent” instead of “stuff” their anger.

Of course, we may think of these kinds of actions as liabilities to human interaction. But anger does have its upside. Manipulating people’s anger leads to getting elected to public office or making money on those shouting matches called “debates” on radio and television.

Physicians tell us that such “venting” is not really healthy. Anger raises the blood pressure and pulse rate, and on rare occasions bursts of anger can trigger heart attacks. If we make it through an episode, the pressure goes down, so we confuse the reduced pulse with a kind of euphoria. We do “feel better now that we have let it all out.” Some studies show that people who “vent” actually live longer than the people who “stuff.” And of course, they make it harder on the people have to take their venting. But the people who dish it out are no happier than the people who have to take it. Well, Duh! Anger and happiness seldom keep the same company. There is plenty of evidence for that. Terrorists and fundamentalists of all kinds - even the “Christian” kind - are driven by rage at infidels, and are never happy in their pronouncements of damnation. More personal and just as unhappy are the marriages that die in the fires set by “control freaks” who cannot seem to control their anger.

The obvious truth is that anger itself is neither healthy or sick. Anger is just a fact, and how we live with it is healthy or devastating for the people around us. Jesus knew the dangers of anger, and he had commands for the ways that his followers lived with the fact of anger around them.

Jesus reminds us of the old common sense truth that murdering people in a fit of rage is breaking one of the Big Ten. The fact is that most murderers - whether the aggressors who wage war that is always messy or the contract killers who just murder to make a living - are the harvest of seeds of anger and rage somewhere. Anger is the root of any murder. Just look at Cain and Abel. Jesus tells followers they have to do more than avoid stepping over the murder line in the dirt. We have to learn to deal with anger as followers.

We followers are commanded by Jesus to go way beyond the boundaries set by the law. We are not supposed to be content with making sure we are not doing something wrong. We are supposed to focus on doing what is right. And the truth we should never forget is clear: doing what is right is always more than not doing what is wrong.

We have heard forever that it is wrong to murder people, but Jesus says if we stay angry with a brother or sister, we are in danger of the same judgment, too. There is a link between the obvious evil of murder and venting our feelings on the people who are closest.

Maybe it is not so far from name calling to murder as we might think. Calling people “names” like “fool” is convenient and dangerous. We can stop treating them as people with faults (like us) because we have reduced them to some label that we would never wear.

One of my retired professors sent me a video in an email yesterday. It was taken by Dr. James Charlesworth, who was a New Testament professor and Archeologist when I was at Duke. The video was from his recent work uncovering the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem - where Jesus healed the sick man who could not get into the stirred waters in time to be healed. Jesus has told him he did not have to wait. He just needed to take up his bed and walk.

Those archeologists dug up something else, too - a first century sewer line that ran from the temple past the pool for about a mile. The new discovery is important, because in 70 CE when the Roman persecutions began, literally thousands of Jewish woman and children hid in this sewer in a last ditch effort for safety. You have already guessed why it was a last effort. They were all slaughtered and left in the sewage. So the Romans persecuted the Christians *and* the Jews in much the way that some Christians persecuted the Jews more recently. Anger and hatred make it easy for us to find a target that we say is less than human, so that we can behave less than human. It is easier to kill people God names as brothers and sisters when we can label them “Jews” or “muslims” or “blacks” or in the bloodiest American war, “yankees” or “rednecks”. These days some people are quick to excuse themselves to listening to differences of opinion by labeling people “socialists” ...or “liberals.”

The “label” means we have already judged them, so it is easier to ignore or dismiss them. Jesus knows that name-calling is a universal sin. In a multi-generational place like a congregation, labeling is one of the few things that young and old share. In fact “they are just young” becomes a label for the old, and “seniors” gives the young a way to “diss” (as in disrespect”) their elders.

We call names so that we can ignore commonality and relatedness - humanity. The Big Ten says we break the law when we murder them. We would never go that far. We just want to turn people into labels and ignore them, so that maybe they will “go away.” But our anger never “goes away” with them. And Jesus says we cannot kill them. He also says we should not label them until we have called them “brother” or “sister.” In fact, Jesus says we followers cannot dismiss them until we have admitted to them face-to-face that we are angry with them.

Jesus is saying that we followers need to face our own problem with how we handle our anger. We need to confess our own sin before we judge the sins and defects or ignore the gifts and graces of others. We probably would not call ourselves the names and labels we are quick to put on others, so maybe it is time that we treated them the way we treat ourselves. Or I might say that better: maybe we should do unto others the way we would wish them to do unto us.

And take note here: By “brother or sister” Jesus means “in the family” in the spiritual sense of the people closest to us - the ones we are committed to love because we are most closely connected to them.

In church, we are supposed to be more than brothers and sisters. We are followers in the divine family. And “Thank God,” we would never have name-calling in a church among the brothers and sisters! [Did you catch the note of sarcasm?] Some churches - some denominations - some traditions - are built on insiders “dissing” - disrespecting other insiders until they leave to become outsiders. When it happens, we call it a “church split.” Do you realize that phrase is an

oxymoron? ...logical opposites put together. It is a logical impossibility for the one body of Christ to decide to become two bodies. Thank God “splits” seldom happen to Presbyterians - mostly because we think being outwardly “nice” is more important than being inwardly humble.

Pastors - interim “pretend” pastors maybe more than the pastors churches put in a stall for a while - are especially interested in church histories. So, we read church histories and even look back on those session minutes to read between the lines to learn the real history.

And we talk to former pastors. I have talked to more than one of your former pastors - in a stall and in-between. They are good folk, all of them, though there seem to be varied opinions among the saints here about their relative worth to the community of faith.

I have heard that years ago there was a genuine church split over one pastor and something about a manse. I have heard from all the pastors that it was a pretty constant effort to keep the factions and “cliches” peaceful. And let’s be honest in the sanctuary: when a pastor resigns with no place to go, one can speculate there was a little tension over the leaving - maybe some disrespecting among the brothers and sisters.

We Presbyterians would never murder anyone. Instead, we huddle with our friends for quiet conversations and carefully concealed hints of name-calling. We Presbyterians are gracious and good and humble, so we seldom go public unless things get really angry. “*Things* get angry, “because *we* never get angry - just disappointed and “prayerfully concerned about the future of our congregation” [much more than about the character of the present community of brother and sister followers].

As your Interim, I don’t know - don’t even want to know - all the messy details of all that happened in a church’s long history, and all the reasons and rationalizations we invent to justify why things happened in any community of faith and behaves in ways that Jesus would never behave. What I have learned in seven months with you is that Northwood is at the heart a really good group of followers. And if followers were remembering to follow the leader, some of the things that have happened among you from time to time probably would not have happened the way they happened.

The trouble is Jesus says murder is completely irrelevant for followers. Jesus says we are not supposed to stay angry with our brothers and sisters. Jesus says we are supposed to take the initiative to deal with our anger before it boils into a rage and deals itself out as destruction to others and to us. Anger can become murder and suicide - to individuals and to groups. Churches generally don’t commit spiritual suicide. They just let the all the niceness and the stuffed anger become part of the way of church life until no one can remember how different it could be.

Here is the trouble with being a follower: we have to go beyond the “do not” in the Big Ten and in the little laws. We have to turn from the “do nots” toward the “do’s” that help us to really change us.

What do we do with our anger, or our resentment, or our “hurt feelings”, or our - however we describe the impasse we have with another follower in the family? What does Jesus say? “before you offer your gift at the table, first get reconciled with your brother or sister.”

Before you try to make things right with God, try to make things right with your neighbor who is your brother or sister. Before you try to worship in your anger to live with it another week, go try to talk with your brother or sister so you can put it aside. Before you postpone dealing with your feelings - which means "stuffing" them so they continue to fester - go get some help to get reconciled. Talk to a counselor about how to talk with your friend or relative. Read some book about the power of forgiveness to help put a resentment past you and the other person. Before you come to a place of boiling anger or you run in retreating despair, you might just get desperate enough to try prayer. You might linger and listen and learn from a phrase most every week: "Forgive my sins as I have forgiven my brothers and sisters their sins."

This table is a gathering place for family, and it has reminded me of the rituals that often happen when families gather for holiday meals. We take a silent pledge for a kind to truce from conflict and a vow to be nice for a couple of hours. This table is not that kind of table! Holiday table manners are all about "etiquette" and being nice on the surface. Sunday is a Holy Day. When we gather here, our table manners are all about "ethic" - about doing for each other the way he has done for us.

Anger ends with different "doing," and following the leader is always easier. The truth is that talking with someone cannot be as bad as we imagine. It is so hard in the imagination, because we have had so little practice at trying.

I would never bar anyone from the Table of the Lord. It can be grace that saves by action of taking and receiving. Surely if this is the table of the Lord, we would never refuse members of God's whole family just because they may not be members of a church.

But I have a gentle suggestion for you today: if this sacrament of forgiveness and grace means a lot to you, maybe you might enter a brief spiritual fast from this table. If there is someone in your life or in this community of faith with whom you feel a barrier, then maybe you might make an attempt to reconcile with them. Then this table might be a different place of meeting with the Lord and with both of you.

I know that the instructions and commands for followers that Jesus gives sometimes do not make sense to us. They just don't seem to work in the world -- because we have never tried to live them. Maybe talking with that brother or sister would be easier than we ever imagined with Christ there with us both. Maybe we would find out how gracious and good and loving this God is who sacrificed everything for us. What if you stopped waiting for the waters to stir and someone to help you into the healing. What if you heard your faithful Savior say, "Rise, go to your brother or sister. Your faith and my grace will save both of you from anger."