

**Matthew 5: 21-26 “The Power of Anger” Rev. Janet Chapman 2/12/23**

So we are doing some fixing up around the church and one of the things on our list is touch-up to our church sign out front on Placer Road at our driveway entrance. It got me to thinking again about church signs, something which is kind of a side fascination for me. What’s in a sign? What does it say about the place, how do people react to it, what is the message? I noticed the Presbyterians got a new sign of which they decided to get one of those that you can put messages on, which subsequently have to be changed regularly or they indicate that no one is paying attention there. When I want a good laugh, I google funny church signs and this week came across the following posted at churches across the nation: Don’t let worry kill you, let the church help...Do you know what hell is? If not, come hear our preacher... Things not needed in heaven: clock, lock, glock, and doc... (11:15 only –“we’re all about dat grace, dat grace, no devil)... And the one which most connects to the divisiveness and political anger engulfing our nation – “The donkey and elephant won’t help, we must turn back to the lamb.”

So true... for years now, contempt has reared its ugly head between Democrats and Republicans, Progressives and Conservatives as witnessed during the recent State of the Union address as well as in speeches and social media. Sadly, contempt isn’t limited to DC halls of power or state capitols but in our personal relationships. Ordinary folks live in a bubble with others with whom they agree, believing that everybody outside the bubble deserves an eye roll or derisive remark from a comfortable distance. In addressing such things, Jesus starts out by saying, “You have heard it said to those who lived a long time ago...” At this, Jesus’ listeners might lean in because it is like he is about to share some juicy gossip with them. Jesus is about to say something about the past and maybe add, “Can you believe what so and so did?” or “Did you hear about what has happened now?” But no, that is not what he is doing; he is setting the stage for clarifying what the disciples have been told in the past. It is

one thing to know the 10 Commandments, the law, but it's a whole different matter to understand the meaning behind the Torah. Jesus' words may have gotten the crowd oohing and aahing about this new information, but not for the reasons they may have thought. This new information begins to turn the perspective of the disciples outside of themselves. They are not disciples for their own sakes alone, but for the sake of those around them as well. There is a need for accountability, a responsibility to others for the sake of the good of the community. Therefore, in chapters 5-7 of Matthew, Jesus teaches the value of checks and balances in the community where we reside. As Karoline Lewis notes, when we start thinking and understanding that our actions not only reveal who we are but also the communities of which we are a part, we begin to feel the weight of what it means to be a member of a community, and so we should. At the same time, and here is the promise of the text, to be part of the community means we are not alone. There is no way that what we do, what Jesus asks us to do as his followers, can reach its fullest potential without having the community of the faithful with us and beside us.

This is particularly helpful news when it comes to handling anger, one of the most common human attributes that Jesus addresses in this section. Who among us hasn't fallen prey to anger in the last few weeks at least once, if not multiple times? When I found out that City of Redding is threatening to pull funding for the GoodWater MicroShelter Project simply because United Way beat us to the first local ground-breaking of micro-shelters, I was angry. When I got rudely cut off in traffic, I was angry. When I stubbed my toe, I got angry. I read about a guy that came to work one day with a bad limp and his coworker asked him what happened. The man answered, "Oh, nothing; It's just an old football injury." The coworker responded, "I didn't know you played football!" "Oh, I didn't; I hurt it in '02 when the Patriots beat the Rams at the Super Bowl. I lost \$500 on the game and put my foot through the TV

set.” Our text today is a reminder of the power of anger, not just within one’s own self but within the community.

We are familiar with the dangers of anger – the Buddha says you will not be punished for your anger, you will be punished by your anger. Frederick Buechner notes that of the so-called 7 Deadly Sins, “anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to save to the last morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back, in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.” In other words, anger can eat you alive. Jesus connects anger as a precursor to murder saying that those who direct anger toward another and speak insulting words should, or will, suffer punishment. Building on the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” Jesus teaches that murder begins as a matter of the heart, growing out of uncontrolled anger. In vs. 22, translated as “to insult a brother or sister,” Jesus uses the verb “raka” which actually conveys the sound of spitting, or hocking to be more graphic, on another person. Jesus recognizes we will disagree with each other, but cautions against conflicts which lead to anger, which then turns to such vehement contempt that one spits on another or worse, takes a life. By implying that murder begins at the point you spit on another with contempt, Jesus is trying to teach his followers how to transfer what they’ve always been told about murder, which operates from an external, legal framework, to a more all-encompassing inner workings of the heart. Clearly, Matthew wants to issue a strong warning about the dangers of harboring anger in the heart.

At the same time, anger isn’t always bad or sinful. Over and over in scripture we see evidence of anger being appropriate. God got angry, prophets got angry when widows and orphans were neglected, Moses got angry when the Israelites make an idol, Jesus got angry at the moneychangers in the temple. When it manifests as

righteous indignation, anger at injustice provides that trajectory towards making things right again. When followers of Jesus go about the often awkward task of trying to right perceived wrongs, anger can be fruitful, especially if it doesn't control hearts but instead motivates positive change. Thomas Aquinas says, "The one who is not angry when there is just cause for anger is immoral> Why? Because anger looks to the good of justice, and if you can live amid injustice without anger, you are both immoral as well as unjust." Both goodness and anger can occupy the same heart as long as anger doesn't become a way of life, a lens through which we view other people. The problem comes when anger interferes with our relationships. Jesus emphasizes the need for reconciliation particularly in the community of faith when we offer our gifts and share at the Table, because once again, we have a responsibility to one another, we are accountable to each other. Old scores need to be settled and wounds healed whenever possible. Although the process of reconciliation and forgiveness takes time and patience, the goal of a clearer conscience and a lighter heart is not to be underestimated.

Jesus comes teaching something new about an age-old truth – forgive each other, seek reconciliation, repent of your own bone-headedness. Just admit that you're not always right and that other people have a perspective you need to hear. Love your neighbor as yourself and respect differing opinions as arising from a sincere desire to find the common good. This isn't an exhaustive to-do list but it is a start to using the power of anger for good. And we don't have to do it all on our own. The good news is that it is our God of community, working in us and through us, that makes all forgiveness and reconciliation possible. Come to think of it, maybe that is the church sign we need to read not just today but everyday – With God all things of value are possible! Thanks be to God!