



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

For several Christmas's I have given a calendar to our church secretary. They have been the kind that you can peel off one day at a time as it sits on your desk. The title of those calendars was "Church signs". Patti uses some of these daily sayings to put on our outdoor sign. And if you go in the church office today, they are sitting on her desk, with a note on top telling everyone, "Hands off, do not rip off any pages". Well, one of the church signs I remembered, and one she did not use yet said, "The same Bible that says BELIEVE also says BEHAVE." Quite a bold statement and it is the topic of our Gospel lesson for today.

Jesus in his famous Sermon on the Mount gives us a detailed set of instructions concerning our relationship with God and with one another. Our passage today deals with anger, adultery, divorce and lying. In the interest of time, I am going to take a look at one of these things that Jesus warns us here against: Anger.

Truth be told, I think you might admit that anger does not seem to be such a big problem. We even on occasion pride ourselves in how we can control our anger and what a great temper we have that is in check. So why the fuss over anger? What importance does Jesus place on it? First, off Jesus begins by talking about murder. This is one of the 10 Commandments given to Moses. And here Jesus is putting his own spin on the command. In other words, he is assuming a Godly prerogative. He is not trying to contradict the Torah laws, but instead is fulfilling them by bringing the disciples into compliance, not with the letter of the law, but with the will of God that inspired the law in the first place.

Jesus uses an example of being angry with a brother or sister and how this might land you in hell or at least in prison. Pretty powerful words and we should not dismiss this warning. It is not often that we talk about hell in a sermon, but I think that Jesus is rather clear here. An ancient theologian once said, "God hath threatened hell, not in order to cast therein, but that He might persuade us to flee from it." God does not send us to hell. We can find our

way there just fine with out by our own actions. God warns us of judgement throughout Scripture to deter us from sin. And anger is a sin that condemn us.

Jesus tells us that we should not hold on to our anger. Yes, it is a human trait, but nothing can justify it. Ephesians 4:26 says, "Be angry, and don't sin. Don't let the sun go down on your wrath." Christians should not hold on to their anger. Instead, we should reconcile with our enemy. Jesus tells us to leave our gift at the altar and go make up with your brother and sister. In Romans, Paul says, "If it is possible, as much as it is up to you, be at peace with all men." We cannot change the heart and attitude of others, but we are able to change ourselves. I think we hear that in the prayer Jesus taught the disciples. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Jesus more than once was said to be angry in Bible stories. Not long ago we had the story of turning over the tables of the money changers in the Temple. Money grubbing men were taking advantage of honest worshipers by charging outrageous price for sacrificial animals. Jesus chases them out with a whip as He was angry with their actions. We call it "righteous indignation." It would be nice if that was the only anger we demonstrated, but we know better. We get angry with people for what we sense they have done to us or how they have wronged us. This anger is unjustified. And it is this type of anger that leads to murder. In 2022 there were 24,576 murders in the U.S., which is down 5% from the prior year.

Do you know who Clarence Darrow was? He was probably the most famous criminal lawyer of his generation in the early 1900's. He once said, "Everyone is a potential murderer. I have not killed anyone, but I frequently get satisfaction out of obituary notices." We are human and do get angry. Police say that more than half of the people murdered in our nation are killed by someone that was a friend or relative. Nice friend, Hey? The root of murder is nothing more than anger. So, it is no wonder that Jesus is so hard on it. Anger is dangerous.

Murder is not the only outcome of anger. Other harmful consequences can come from the words people use when they are angry. This is particularly true when the harsh words are said to the young. When I was 18, I went to St Olaf college with a dream of being a music teacher. All during school that is what I wanted to be more than anything in the world. When I got to ST Olaf and had tryouts for the music department, the band director told me I was tone deaf and I should find something else to do. It did not take long for my bubble to burst, and as you can see, I am not a music teacher today. Maybe he was right or not, but those words did change the path of my life. Insults and hurtful statements can have long-lasting effects and Jesus tells us that this is dangerous.

Another effect that anger has is from name-calling. This can lead to not only pain but also division between people. We surely see this in our country today. To call someone a Nazi has big implications today. Or to use the N word when speaking about black Americans can cause huge riffs. I remember when I was in junior high school there were many many jokes going around about people of Polish descent. They were funny sure, but hurtful if your grandparents came from Poland for a better life in the United States. Today we laugh at Ole

and Lena jokes but need to be careful that someone does not take offense. Real damage can be done when there are mean-spirited insults.

Jesus warns in this text about calling someone a “fool”. That is very hurtful as well and can also damage a person’s good name, just by calling someone a thief or a liar or immoral would. What did momma teach you? Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt you.” Parents used this to prepare their children for those times when their children get bullied in school.

William Barclay once said, “a person’s outward actions are under judgment, the inmost thought is also under the scrutiny and the judgment of God. Long lasting anger is bad; contemptuous speaking is worse, and the careless malicious talk which destroys someone’s good name is worst of all.” And he goes on to say that those that are a slave to anger and speak contempt, or who destroy another’s good name may not have committed murder in action, but they commit murder at heart.

Throughout the New Testament we hear over and over again that those 10 Commandments of the Old Testament are boiled down to 2. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. God is very concerned about us loving others and making right relationship with your neighbors. Jesus in this Matthew text concerning anger, talks about just that. He is concerned enough to let us know that getting those relationships straight take priority over participating in ritual worship. Now don’t get me wrong, I don’t want you to get up and leave worship this morning to make amends with your brother or sister, but certainly give some thought to making amends and not letting things fester. Rather forgive and ask God to “Create in me a clean heart, O God.”

Reining in our anger is a very tough thing to do as others can be so frustrating, irritating, and exasperating. But remember we are all in this together. When the Bible defines God as “love” and defines us as created in God’s image, the Bible is tipping us off to something extremely important. Love goes along with relationships and God made us for relationships. The care and nurture of those relationships is part and parcel of our Christian discipleship. Being right with your neighbor will make being right with God second nature and vice versa. Because it is truly important how we live our life as God’s people. We are held to a higher standard now that we know God and love God. And because we know that our sins are forgiven. We are called to help one another, forgive one another, respect one another. It is hard work being a Christian, loving God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength and then loving our neighbors as ourselves. Let us not forget that the same Bible that says BELIVE also says BEHAVE!

AMEN