

Willow Glen UMC February 16, 2014 “Leave Your Gift”
Matthew 5:21-26

Of all the sad stories to come out of Afghanistan after 9/11, one of the saddest I remember reading was about two men in Kabul, Afghanistan, the year the bombs fell. Ishak Levin and Zebulon Simentov were about the only Jews left in the whole city. And in the dark of December, they shuffled into a dilapidated synagogue, spoke only long enough to argue about the proper date for the start of Hanukkah, then lit their candles at opposite ends of the room, each saying their prayers alone. Despite their shared relief at the fall of the Taliban, the two could not celebrate together. “He is a bad person,” one whispered. “That man is my enemy,” the other said.

The two men had survived the Soviet occupation, a long and bloody civil war and the Taliban regime. But they could not tolerate each other. Each one blamed the other for the loss of their beloved Torah scroll. Both had relatives in Israel and could emigrate if they cared to. But both said that they would never leave Kabul, nor would

they ever give up their anger at each other. [*San Francisco Chronicle*, December 10, 2001]

Anger is at the root of so much of the world's tragedy today, in that part of the world anyway. It's our global concern now. But it is also a gospel concern. So I want to invite you to take a look at anger in the Book of Genesis in order to understand what Jesus is saying about anger in the Gospel of Matthew.

Genesis means "beginning," and in Chapter 4 we have the beginning of anger. Cain is the first-born. He was a tiller of the ground. Abel was next. He was a keeper of sheep. One day Cain brings an offering of grain and Abel, an offering of meat. And God chooses Abel's offering over Cain's.

Now, the action of God in this story is a little problematic, but that will have to be another sermon. I want to focus not on the action of God but on the reaction of Cain. He's angry, of course. It hardly seems fair. And the Lord says to him, "Why are you angry? ...[here comes the warning] If you do well, will you not be

accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” [Gen 4:6-7]

Here’s God doing the very first seminar in anger management and doesn’t get very good results. No sooner has God left the scene than Cain lures his brother out into the field and kills him. Cain’s anger sets into motion an almost unstoppable sequence of events that leads to violence and death.

This is the story to keep in mind when we read our lesson in Matthew this morning. Jesus has already said that he came to fulfill the law. Not only that but Jesus came to extend the law. Here’s a prime example. The law says, “You shall not murder.” Jesus says, “If you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment....” Jesus clearly saw the connection between anger and murder. He remembered the story of Cain and Abel. And he could see that it isn’t enough just to forbid the killing. You have to strike the violence at its root, which is anger in the human heart.

Jesus reminds us that anger is often the originating sin in our lives today. It's the first impulse that gives rise to murderous thoughts that in turn evolve into all kinds of vengeful acts, from name-calling and bad-mouthing to back-stabbing, right on up to blood-letting. As the old Peter Yarrow song goes: it's been going on for ten thousand years.

Cain was amateurish when it comes to killing. Just five generations later, Lamech had turned murder into an art form. "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." [Gen 4:23-24]

You'll remember that God put a stop to all that a few chapters later with the flood. God wiped the earth clean again, for a little while anyway. But in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus would put a stop to the violence by wiping our conscience clean. He says: "So, when you are offering your gift at the altar"— again we think of the story of Cain and Abel— "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.”

The focus in Jesus’ teaching is not the anger but what we’re supposed to do with it. He doesn’t tell us to suppress it, for then it will work its evil in our own spirits and spring out again on some unsuspecting soul in some completely unrelated situation. How else can we explain freeway driving?

No, Jesus is saying here that we’re supposed to acknowledge it, work through it, and resolve it. Leaving our gift at the altar means putting a pause in our lives for long enough so that we can go and mend a relationship. That’s what Jesus is talking about when he says: “first be reconciled... and then come and offer your gift.”

One communion Sunday, one of my parishioners came up to me and said, "I don't think I can take communion anymore. I just can't forgive my sister for what she has done to me. My heart is not in the right place." I said to her, "Is your heart open to receive the grace

that would enable you to forgive your sister? If your heart is at all open to the healing God wants to give you, then come to the table."

God can help us with the anger that is eating us. But Jesus is saying something more in this passage. Listen closely: "if you remember that your brother or sister has something *against you*, leave your gift...and go...." Jesus turns the tables here. It's not just our anger that we have to be concerned about, but the other guy's. We may have nothing against anyone, but someone may be mad at us. And here is Jesus saying it's our responsibility to initiate the reconciliation.

Now it's easy to get angry with others for all kinds of reasons. It's much harder to acknowledge that others have legitimate reasons to be angry with us. This is what makes this such a hard passage in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, before you come to the altar and give thanks to God, better take a good, hard look at yourself.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 marked the first time that many Americans became aware that there are an awful lot of people

around the world who are angry at us: for reasons ranging from global warming to the global economy, from supporting Israel to invading Iraq. Some of that anger may be misplaced, but that's doesn't mean we can write it off. Anger was the originating sin that produced a bunch of crazed men who terrorized this country in 2001. Knowing that the anger continues to fester, we can't afford not to try to deal with its root causes. God asked Cain, "why are you angry?" It wouldn't hurt us to ask that same question.

For if we don't deal with the anger that's coming at us, we are in big trouble. Jesus says, "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."

It hardly matters whether we are innocent or guilty of the charges the world throws at us. The truth is that we have paid a terrible price already for not dealing with the anger that results when

hundreds of millions of people are pressed down by unending poverty, brutality and hopelessness. You can say it isn't our fault. But as you can see, it's our problem.

Our world is getting smaller by the day and there is no getting away from these problems any longer. If we don't address them, then we are throwing ourselves into our own prisons of paranoia and insecurity. The only way out, the only way to defuse the anger and reduce the threat of terror is to find a way to reconcile with the have-nots of the world. If you want peace, work for justice, my friends. Leave your gift at the altar and go, be reconciled.

Anger has global consequences. Anger has always been a gospel concern. We started with the personal, Ishak and Zebulon. Let's end there. You may remember the story of Amy Biehl—Stanford grad, champion swimmer, Fulbright scholar—who went to South Africa in 1993 to study women's issues and work on voter education. Driving through the black township of Guguletu on the day before she was to return home, Amy was attacked by a mob of

young men opposed to the apartheid system. Simply because she was white and they were angry, Amy Biehl was killed. Four men were convicted of her murder and given 18-year jail terms.

In 1997, the four requested amnesty from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission led by Archbishop Tutu. Amy's parents flew to South Africa to testify on behalf of their daughter's killers. Today, two of them work for a foundation set up in Amy's memory that provides after-school programs for poor children. Amy's father told reporters, "It's liberating to forgive. We can sleep at night and we feel totally at ease. You can't do that if you're harboring hate and anger."

Jesus wants us to deal with our anger and not give in to the sin and the self-destruction that is lurking at the door. Reconciliation demands real effort. And most of us aren't like the Biehls. We won't get our story published in the newspapers. The woman I told you about who was angry at her sister? I watched her struggle with her anger for years. But I have to say that I saw her sister about a

month ago. Being nosy, I asked how the siblings were doing. Her sister says they are talking by phone most weeks now and get together for lunch every couple of months. Knowing what I know about the long, sordid history of that relationship, this is nothing short of a miracle.

Reconciliation *can* happen, my friends. But before you start making excuses, I'll just say that there is never the right time. There is never the perfect opportunity. Except perhaps now as you face the altar of God. Now is the moment to commit the time, to change the pattern, to come to terms and be reconciled. As Paul says, now is the acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation. [2 Corinthians 6:2] So leave your gift here and go. And may God's grace go with you. Amen.