

From the Heart

Rev. John Vertigan

February 13, 2011

One of my most reliable resources for gaining insight for preaching pushed me up against the wall this week with its opening sentence of reflection. "Preaching the Gospel lesson for today presents quite a challenge." "Thanks a lot," I thought, and decided to put on some music. I considered that maybe filling the house with music would help my own head fill less empty.

So, as I sat down to write, my i-pod was on shuffle. At the moment, someone is singing a cover of "How Can You Mend a Broken Heart", saying,

**No one ever told us about the sorrow
So how can you mend a broken heart
How can you keep the rain from falling down
How can you stop the sun from shining
What makes the world go round?
Help me mend my broken heart and let me live again.**

Jesus said, in the Sermon on the Mount,

'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.

By referring back to ancient times, Jesus is letting us know again that he did not come to replace the Ten Commandments; he did not come to say that Judaism is a wrong religion; rather, he came to show us the way to fullness of life; he came to show us what it means to be fully alive; he came to show us how to mend a broken heart; he came to offer us a doorway into the realm of God that is right in front of us if only we will expand our horizons and partake in the experience of God's abundance.

By referring back to ancient times, he is reminding his audience from whence they come and then he offers them a way forward.

Deuteronomy says,

"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."

How can you mend a broken heart and live again? Do this and live. A good portion of the Gospel lesson today is devoted to making broken relationships right, mending what seem like irreconcilable differences, treating others with respect, avoiding anger because of its personal costs and the cost it imposes on the community.

People who are angry, for instance, have a tendency to say things they wish they hadn't, thus insulting their brother or sister. Name calling born of anger and litigation born of resentment and a desire for revenge both break the community and cost time, positive energy, and effort on behalf of mediators in order to try and restore right relationship. People who refuse to deal with one another because they are insulted or angry, Jesus says, will be liable to judgment not only for any wrong they may have committed, but for their refusal to seek reconciliation and wholeness in relationship with their neighbor or their accuser.

Similarly with his 'you have heard it said' that has to do with adultery. Of course, President Jimmy Carter made this scripture famous a generation ago when he admitted to having lusted in his heart and asked for forgiveness of the American people. He was soundly mocked for that at the time, and we might still question the efficacy of his attempt at humility, but we must at least recognize that here was a politician of national stature who was trying to take the scriptures seriously.

When I have spoken with couples, over the years, who have experienced infidelity in their committed relationship, it is almost always true that there is a ton of anger to deal with. It is almost always true that the relationship has been in the process of breaking down for awhile before the infidelity occurred, and it is almost always true that, at the time we are speaking together about it, one party in the relationship is just not ready to offer forgiveness for the wrong that has happened to them in their marriage. It's the anger thing, and not to be taken lightly. But yes, it is to be taken seriously, and the eventual response falls into line with what Jesus is offering to those who wish to move on from brokenness and enjoy a full, though quite possibly very different, life.

How can you mend a broken heart and live again? Do this and live. Deal with your anger. That is, in a nutshell, what I think Jesus is talking about here, even as he offers a moral code for those who want the best out of life. Deal with your anger and be reconciled; deal with the anger of others and seek forgiveness; deal with the anger that lives deep in your heart and move on to wherever it is you are going.

Deal with your anger. Do this and live. It's a lesson as ancient as the ancients of whom Jesus spoke in this Sermon on the Mount.

And even though the question in the song on my I-Pod comes from the 1970's, that old, old answer crosses not only generational boundaries from ancient times to this very day, it crosses, geographic and religious lines, too.

In Buddhism there is the admonition to "Conquer anger by love."

The non-violent religion of Jainism that comes to us from India teaches that, "Anger dissolves affection.... Therefore humans should subvert anger by forgiveness.

Our own Christian tradition teaches that "The anger of man does not work the righteousness of God" (James 1:20)

Islam, the religion so many people are preaching hatred toward, teaches that "The strong man is not the good wrestler; the strong man is only he who controls himself when he is angry."

Judaism teaches that "Anger deprives a sage of his wisdom, a prophet of his vision."

In the shared tradition that we find with our Jewish brothers and sisters, Proverbs 16:32 says, One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one who rules his spirit than one who takes a city.

Finally, from African Traditional Religions, an Idoma proverb from Nigeria says it most simply, The fly cannot be driven away by getting angry at it.

Now, we could have a wonderful conversation about righteous anger vs. explosive rage; anger born of legitimately being wronged that calls forth an advocacy for justice and a cry for what is wrong to be made right vs. the angry cry of a petulant child who doesn't get what he wants or a petulant adult whose sense of entitlement is dissolved in an instant of change that the adult just can't handle. Those might well be fun conversations, I admit, but I think that walking down that road would only lead us to either a dangerous self-righteousness or an unnecessary sense of guilt and shame, since we've all been guilty on each of these accounts at some point in our long or short life. So let's not go there. Besides, Jesus didn't come to make people feel guilty. He said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." So, since we already have a pretty good sense of where we come from, let's consider that invitation to a way forward that Jesus offered his own folks so long ago. This, we can do quite briefly.

"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.

An eminent preacher of these days says that "at the heart of this law lies a respect for the life of another, regard for the right of another to be, reverence for another as the creation of God." The text goes as far as encouraging those who are not treated well to reach out and foster places of reconciliation.

Another paraphrases the Gospel lesson and then says, "'Trivialize even the smallest item in God's Law and you will only have trivialized yourself. But take it seriously, show the way for others, and you will find honor in the realm of God. Unless you do far better than the Pharisees in the matters of right living, you won't know the first thing about entering the kingdom" (The Message). Relationships are not to be taken lightly. The command to love God and to love others as self is unstated but is also central to reading the text. Mutuality and respect come when individuals honor neighbor as self. It is only then that right relationship is realized. Right relationship comes from the heart!

Deal with your anger and be reconciled; deal with the anger of others and seek forgiveness; deal with the anger that lives deep in your heart and move on to wherever it is you are going.

**So how can you mend a broken heart
How can you keep the rain from falling down
How can you stop the sun from shining
What makes the world go round?
Help me mend my broken heart and let me live again.**

Leo Tolstoy, in the 19th century, "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself."

Church, not a one of you who have come here today is trivial in the eyes of God, and neither is God's invitation to you in Jesus Christ. No matter who you are and no matter where you find yourself in life's journey, there is a way forward to the realm of God that is the realm of forgiveness and love and reconciled living. We are never too young to receive it, never too old to find it, never so far from it that it cannot refresh us. Do this and live. May God teach us to choose blessing and life rather than death, so that we may walk blamelessly, seeking God through reconciliation with all of God's children.

Amen.