

Living the Antitheses
A Sermon on Matthew 5:21-37
Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany
February 12, 2017

Introduction

We are continuing in our series on the Sermon on the Mount. Last week Mary talked about a higher righteousness. It is part of Christian identity in a hostile world.

Righteousness is a word that we don't use much today, except in a negative sense, when we say that someone is self-righteous. A better word for a higher righteousness today would be a higher ethics or a higher spirituality. Jesus is not laying down a bunch of rules. He is giving examples of what ethics and spirituality are like in the kingdom of God, or, as Matthew calls it, the kingdom of the heavens. Jesus is telling the disciples how they can be salt and light for the world.

Two weeks ago I spoke to you about *Living the Beatitudes*, making the Beatitudes part of your spirituality. Today I will talk about *Living the Antitheses*.

First Move: Preserving Relationships

This section of the Sermon on the Mount is called the Antitheses. They all have the same formula. You have heard that it was said, but I say to you. There are six antitheses. The first four are in today's Scripture. The other two, turn the other cheek and love your enemies, are next week.

They were first called the Antitheses by Marcion in the early second century. Marcion was one of the first Christian heretics. He believed that the Gospels and Paul's letters superseded the Hebrew Bible. Antitheses is a misleading label for these sayings. Antithesis means opposite. State a proposition or a thesis, then state its opposite. Loving your enemies is the antithesis of hating your enemies. Turning the other cheek is the antithesis of striking back. It gives us the impression that Jesus is laying down new rules that supersede the Law. Last week's text says just the opposite: Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill the Law.

Each of the Antitheses begins with a proposition of law. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not swear false oaths. These laws all come from the Torah. The new proposition that Jesus tells us is not the opposite of the law, it is an intensification of the law. Jesus radicalizes the Torah. The Latin word

radix means root. Jesus is getting at the root of the good news. He is telling us what life in the kingdom of God is like in all its fullness.

The first antithesis is about anger. You have heard that it was said, Thou shall not kill, but I say to you in addition that everyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Don't even be angry with your brother. That is a much more radical command. It is feelings of anger that lead to murder.

Then he gives three practical applications. The first is a prohibition. If you call your brother, *Raka*, you will be subject to the council. *Raka* was a Semitic epithet. It means Empty Head. Whoever might say, Fool or Moron, will be subject to the Gehenna of fire. Gehenna was an area south of Jerusalem where the trash and refuse from the city were burned. It later came to be associated with the fires of punishment.

Insulting your brother will subject you to the fires of hell. If that's the case, hell would be pretty crowded today. When people talk politics on TV or radio or social media, Empty Head and Fool would be about the kindest things you would hear someone say about people they disagree with. We live in a coarse culture. We demonize people we disagree with instead of talking to them and trying to work through our differences.

Jesus gives two examples of how we should reconcile with our brother and sister. If you go to the Temple and offer a gift on the altar and remember while you are there that your brother has something against you, leave your offering and go first and be reconciled to your brother. This is more radical than it sounds. The Temple was in Jerusalem. Jesus was speaking to crowds in Galilee. If they traveled to Jerusalem to make an offering to God, they should first go back to Galilee and be reconciled with their brother, then return to offer their gift. It is not appropriate to go to God in worship if we are filled with feelings of anger. The desert fathers said that anger crowds out our desire for God. We are consumed by our anger; it blocks out connection with God. It even blocks the love of God.

The second example is about going to court. While you are going to court with your accuser, make friends with him. Work out your differences instead of asking the judge to decide. The court will not seek a compromise—it will rule in favor of one party or the other. The parties will be likely to be even more bitter toward each other if a judge decides that there is a winner and a loser.

The second antithesis is about lust or envy. You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery, but I say to you in addition that whoever looks a woman with lust in his heart has already committed adultery.

Adultery destroys human relationships. If a married man commits adultery with a married woman, then both their marriages are destroyed. There is a ripple effect. In

a small community, adultery affects everyone in the community. What would happen in a small town in Galilee or in a small church today when there is adultery? It touches other people in the community. They take sides. It produces cliques instead of one big happy family.

Jesus gives two radical examples. If your right eye causes you to lust, tear it out. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. I believe that Jesus is speaking figuratively. These are not intended to be literal examples. This teaching has sometimes been taken literally. According to legend, Origen, one of the fathers of the church in the third century, castrated himself when he felt feelings of lust. I believe it is better and healthier to interpret Jesus as intending for us to take radical steps to root out the lust. This saying could also be interpreted on the group level. If the community is the body of Christ, and the hand is causing the community to sin, cast out the hand.

The third antithesis: It was said, whoever divorces his wife, give her a certificate of release. Divorce laws were different among Jews in the first century. Only men could seek a divorce. They didn't need to go to court. They could sign a certificate of release in front of two witnesses. The man was renouncing any further property rights in the woman. It was like signing a deed. I release all my rights to this property.

This was a hot topic in Judaism in the first century. One school of thought argued that a Jewish man could get a divorce if the woman displeased him for any reason. A more traditional view was that divorce was appropriate only on the grounds of infidelity. This appears to be the position that Jesus takes.

Divorce was devastating for the woman in a patriarchal culture. She was financially dependent on the man. When she was divorced, she had no one to support her and she was stigmatized.

Jesus limits divorce. He says that men can't treat women like property that they can discard whenever they please. Jesus is cutting back on male privilege.

The fourth antithesis. You have heard that it was said, you shall not swear a false oath. But I say to you do not swear at all.

This is not swearing as in cursing or taking the Lord's name in vain. This is swearing an oath. People took oaths to guarantee that what they were saying was truthful. May God punish me if what I say is false.

Jesus does away with oaths altogether. You should always be truthful. You shouldn't have to resort to an oath to assure someone that you are being truthful.

There are at least two ways to interpret this antithesis. Oaths are given as a pledge of loyalty to the state. Early Christians refused to take oaths of allegiance to

Rome or to fight in the Roman army. In more recent times, Mennonites have refused to take oaths because they are pacifists and refuse to serve as soldiers. I asked a Mennonite minister for the basis for their rejection of oaths. He said there was a diversity of Mennonite thought. It could be referring to an oath of allegiance. That is similar to worshiping other gods. It could also be a matter of simplicity. Let your Yes be Yes and your No be No. Don't exaggerate or color your remarks with your own judgments. Just the facts, ma'am.

That could be helpful in today's toxic political climate. People will be more likely to hear what you are saying if you don't color your statements with partisan language.

A thread that runs through each of the first four antitheses is a higher ethic: to preserve and strengthen relationships. We have a responsibility to the other people in our lives. We should keep from damaging those relationships, and we have an affirmative duty to repair and restore those relationships.

Second Move: Expressing Vulnerability

I would like to take our remaining moments and focus on anger as an example of a higher spirituality.

In addition to the Sermon on the Mount, anger is addressed in Ephesians and James. Ephesians 4:36 says, "Be angry, but do not sin. Don't let the sun go down on your anger." It is natural to be angry occasionally. It is what you do with your anger that matters. Don't nurse your anger and don't repress it. James 1:19 says, "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.."

Modern psychology adds to the Biblical understanding of anger. Anger gets a bad rap. Anger in itself is not a negative emotion. Every single person in this room gets angry occasionally. Anger is a universal feeling that people have when they believe that they are being treated unfairly.

Marshall Rosenberg, the psychologist who wrote *Nonviolent Communication*, says that anger is like a warning light on our dashboard. It lets us know that something is wrong. We can't ignore it or things will get worse. We can only repress our anger for so long before we explode. We need to examine our anger and determine what caused it.

How we respond to our anger is where the good or evil lies. Robert Augustus Masters in *Emotional Intimacy* distinguishes between clean anger and unclean anger. Clean anger is a feeling of hurt. We feel vulnerable. We are still capable of

compassion when we have clean anger. We respond non-violently to clean anger. We take the suffering upon ourselves instead of retaliating.

We make our anger unclean when we respond violently to it. We convert our anger into aggression, shaming or blaming. The aggression can be physical or verbal. We can hit the person who is making us angry or we can lash out at them. We can slam a door or raise our voice. When we shame or blame someone, we are trying to make them feel small. Shaming is the example that Jesus uses, when we call someone an idiot or a moron.

Our task is not to stop having anger, but to develop the capacity for clean anger. We have to wake up in the middle of our anger and recognize what is happening. It is easy to use our anger as a weapon—that is what society teaches us to do. Sharon Strand Ellison says in *Taking the War out of Our Words* that we use war metaphors for arguments. Defend yourself. Fight back. Don't appear weak. Our conflicts turn into power struggles that create emotional distance instead of emotional intimacy.

Anger is loaded with energy and we use that energy to fuel our aggression. The extra energy makes it harder to keep our anger in control, to make it transparent and vulnerable, and to resist the urge to blame.

Masters says that aggression is actually an avoidance of anger, and the hurt and the vulnerability that go with it. Aggression is an attempt to gratify our ego. Anger gets a bad rap because it makes us think of angry people, people that we call hotheads. They have fragile egos. They are quick to perceive ambiguous actions as a threat to their honor. They need counseling on anger management.

When our anger is clean, we show our vulnerability. We put down our shield and invite the other person in. I feel angry when you say that or do that. Let go of the content of whatever it is that is making you angry. That is beside the point. Stop the argument and try to make an emotional connection with the other person. Making intimate connection is more important than being right. Even a trace of caring can greatly alter the course that anger takes.

This requires humility on our part. We must not be afraid to appear weak, to put down our defenses and admit that our vulnerabilities. It also requires us to trust the other person, that they will be touched by our vulnerability instead of mocking us. Try showing vulnerability on social media sometime. Most of your friends will be sympathetic, but some of your more distant friends will not. I had to unfriend a couple of people on FaceBook this week.

Receiving anger is just as important as expressing anger. When we perceive that the other person is angry, lay down your offering and go make peace with them.

This requires a higher degree of spiritual maturity, being willing to empathize with a person who is angry and calm them down by listening for their needs.

Rosenberg encourages us to look at the need within us that gives rise to our anger. Don't say, you did this to me. Then you are thinking that the other person is evil or bad and needs to be punished. Instead of being connected with our need, we go up to our head and judge the other person. Say, when you do this, I feel this. My need for this is not being met. By focusing directly on our needs, we are more likely to get them met. We arouse the compassion in the other person when we are vulnerable and express our needs. Most people will want to lay down their weapons and help us meet our needs.

This is hard to do because most of us are not in touch with our own needs. Rosenberg says that we need to develop a literacy of needs. The basic function of feelings and emotions is to serve our needs.

Rosenberg describes a conversation he had with a prisoner in Sweden. He had a lot of anger with the prison authorities. Rosenberg asked him what they had done to make him angry. He said, "I made a request for some job training materials three weeks ago and they still haven't responded. Rosenberg asked him to look inside himself and tell him what the cause of the anger was. The prisoner said, "I just told you." Rosenberg said, "You just told me what was the trigger of your anger. But what was the cause?" The prisoner was confused, like most of us would be. He had not been trained to be conscious of what was going on inside himself when he got angry. He said, "They're not fair. They're not treating me right." Rosenberg said, "No, those are judgments. Which approach is more likely to get prison officials to meet your needs? If you are connected to your needs and fears, and express those needs and fears to them, or if you are up in your head, judging them and getting angry."

Now the prisoner understood. He said, "I can't talk about it right now." Two hours later, he came to Rosenberg and said, "I wish you could have taught me two years ago about anger what you taught me this morning. I wouldn't have had to kill my best friend."

Rosenberg coached the prisoner on how to be honest about his needs with the prison officials. "I made a request three weeks ago. I still haven't heard from you, and I'm feeling scared because I have a need to be able to earn a living when I leave this prison and I am afraid that without the training I was requesting, it would be hard for me to make a living. So I'd like you to tell me what is preventing you from responding to my request."

Conclusion

Responding non-violently to anger is hard work. It doesn't come naturally. It is even harder with people that we are closest to. We have a long history with them. We have to unlearn old habits. Sharon Strand Ellison says that we are like flies circling in a jar. When you take the lid off the jar, the flies still keep circling in the jar.

Your anger is a gift from God. It is a warning light. Learning how to use that gift is a spiritual practice. Instead of going straight to our heads to judge the other person, we can look inside ourselves to see what our needs are. That will require us to learn about our needs. It will require us to reveal our vulnerability. That is part of the interior life.

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