

NEVER IGNORE WHAT YOU SUDDENLY REMEMBER

*a sermon for Feb. 12, 2023 delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno
based on Matt. 5:21-30*

"You have heard that it was said to those in 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. . . . "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Now . . . do you think Jesus says this because he loves to come down on people? Well, I believe he says what he says because he knows the human heart so well. He knows how smug we can be, and how likely we are to compare ourselves to each other. We judge ourselves harshly sometimes, and then for relief we look around for someone else whose sins are darker, ranker, riper.

He is saying, "Be careful about comparing yourself to others ethically. The seeds of murder and adultery live in us all, every one of us."

You may think he is exaggerating here, but the step from lust to adultery is a short one. And, for some, the step from rage to murder is just as short, which is why I have trouble with gun laws being so loose and guns being so plentiful . . . but that's another sermon.

No, what Jesus is concerned with here is not God's judgment on us, but our judgments of others.

That's why Jesus adds the following thought:

If you are worshipping at the altar, and there you remember that a brother, a sister, a parent, a child has something against you, drop everything, rush out, and fix it, if you can; then come back.

Now, how literally are we supposed to take that?

We all know that Jesus loved parables. But he also loved hyperbole. He was prone to exaggeration.

He once said, "If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. Throw it away."

He also said, "Take the log out of your own eye and maybe you will be able to see the speck of dust in your neighbor's eye."

So, if you are in church and you remember that someone has something against you, and you run off to settle things with her before the last hymn, you may be taking Jesus a bit too literally.

Doing that could turn your life into a circus. If you are forever running around asking everyone if you've offended them, life would be pretty chaotic. I mean, if you come to me ten times and ask me, "Do you have anything against me?" I would say, "I'm beginning to. You're getting on my nerves."

I think Jesus would say, "Don't take me literally on this business of running out of church to take care of business – don't pluck your eye out either, but, hey, do take me seriously."

A wonderful minister, Fred Craddock, tells a story of a plane trip he once took. Next to him sat a woman who was crying profusely. He knew it was going to be a long trip.

"This is obviously a sad day for you," he said.

She said, —Yes. She didn't stop crying. He had not healed her wound.

He said, —I'm very sorry, because it is a beautiful day.

She said, —I'm going to my father's funeral.

He said, —Oh, it's obvious from your crying that you and he were very close.

And she said, —No, on the contrary. I have not written, I have not called, I have not spoken to my father in 17 years.

In fact, the last time I was in his home, I slammed out of that house, and as I left his house the last thing I said to my father was, 'Go to hell.' 17 years ago, that was the last thing I said, and now he is dead.'"

I remember a 90 year old woman who attended the first church I ever pastored. I remember a sadness about her I couldn't identify, but which she always carried around with her.

One day, when we had known each other a long time, she confessed something to me. She said that back in 1918 she had said something to her step-father that she couldn't even repeat to me.

She said that a day had not gone by that she hadn't felt a dagger in her stomach because of that encounter. She felt that what she had said was unforgivable, and nothing I said or could say was going to heal that 70 year old open wound.

It's amazing the burdens some people carry around with them.

Father Richard Rohr was asked once if there was any one thing he had learned categorically in his years as a monk living with other monks. He said what he had learned was that "all of us are deeply wounded at the core." I think that's true of everyone.

So, with that, I want to close this homily with a short reflection on a topic that needs to be addressed from time to time: The Passing of the Peace –

Now, I know that some of you would rather be strapped to the ground and eaten by fire ants than participate in the passing of the peace. For some of you it feels like open season on introverts.

For others it's no big deal – we just look around and say, "Peace," or "Peace of Christ be with you." No big deal. Well, we all need to remember why we do it.

It's not just about saying, "Hi." Nothing wrong with saying hi, during the passing of the peace. Sometimes that just feels right, but there is a spiritual dimension to it we don't want to ignore.

I mean, it isn't our own peace that we offer one another. It's the peace Jesus offered everyone with no conditions -- friends and enemies alike.

That's good news, because when we don't have it in us to offer another person peace, we can rest in that.

The Passing of the Peace is a ritualistic reminder that we shouldn't wait until it's too late to reconcile with those in the world we need to make our peace with. Jesus' words about coming to the altar and remembering someone we aren't right with are meant to plant a seed in us.

I want to close with an example we might take with us and remember.

Just three days before he died, Senator Hubert Humphrey put in a phone call to his friend Jesse Jackson. He wanted to say a loving goodbye, Humphrey had been among the earliest white supporters of civil rights legislation. He spoke in favor of it at the 1948 Democratic convention, in fact.

Jesse Jackson was touched deeply and wanted to know who else Humphrey was calling with last warm wishes. Humphrey told Jesse Jackson he had just spoken with Richard Nixon. Jackson was surprised, knowing the enmity they had between them.

Humphrey said that knowing he was in his last days, he didn't want to die with any ill will on his chest. He was moved that Nixon received the gesture of his call warmly and gratefully. Both men had learned a lot about what was truly important in life as they were sunseting.

Humphrey told Jackson that the most important thing people should do in their last days was to forgive one another and redeem one another so that both could move on in peace.

Peace. It's what we all need. The peace of Jesus. Amen