

CHARACTER MEANS CHOOSING *The Most Important Thing*

Matthew 5:21-26

October 13, 2024

These verses come from the Sermon on the Mount. Here, Jesus speaks not to the vast crowd, the multitude, that has followed him through the Galilean countryside, but to his closest friends, his followers, his disciples. He speaks to them about the spiritual danger of anger and resentment. Scholars sometimes call these the “hard sayings of Jesus.” Hard, yes, because they shift the focus from our actions to our intentions. Jesus asks his disciples to examine our hearts. If you are at the altar, if you are in the sanctuary, if you are at the sacred place of worship, if you are standing on holy ground, and there you remember that somebody somewhere has something against you, leave immediately and be reconciled before returning to worship.

Here Jesus suggests something rather radical. It is this: reconciliation is a prerequisite for worship. Interpersonal peace precedes proper praise. We cannot draw near to God when we are distant from each other.

It is perhaps easy to understand why this is one of those hard sayings, along with the words you just heard later in the Gospel of Matthew, when Peter thinks he’s being generous by saying, “Do I have to forgive someone seven times?” and Jesus extends it by a multitude. Not seven, but seventy times seven. Some prefer to think of these words as parables, as intentional overstatement, exaggeration meant to make a point. Not for us to take literally. This is both a relief, and at some level it makes sense. After all, we are so practiced at justifying our actions, demonizing our adversaries, holding close our resentments. A friend recently pointed out to me how appropriate it is that we speak of “nursing” our grudges. We often treat our bitterness with more care than our joy. We can find

so many reasons to avoid reconciliation, and we can spin these words of Jesus as parables, as metaphors meant to make a point. Many of these excuses make good sense, at least in our own minds.

But then, Jesus says, we come to worship. We find ourselves in the presence of God without the protective armor of self-absorption. We are vulnerable. We are fully present. Our hearts and minds open. And here is what happens. At the altar, in the sanctuary, on holy ground, we remember. Our hearts remember. Worship evokes memory in a way nothing else can. Seated in the presence of God, we recall words spoken in anger days ago that had slipped our minds. We summon up an act of inappropriate aggression toward a stranger. We cringe at a social media comment that we once viewed as a brilliant take down of a lesser point of view. We regret the silent treatment toward our spouse or the quick temper toward our children. Here, in worship, we examine our hearts. We reflect not on how justified or righteous our anger was, but on how this carefully guarded resentment is shaping our character. Here, joined in community and gathered before God, we do remember.

The great preacher Fred Craddock brings the message home, writing, “Memory is a powerful stab of awakening to face our duty. If you’re at the altar and you’re offering your gift and there you remember, leave it and go...this is urgent. Do it immediately. Don’t wait; delay could be deadly. It will fester. You will find yourself in a ritual of going into the backyard and lifting the stone to make sure the snake is still there, that it is now defining your life. Don’t let that happen. Go first. Go now. Jesus says there is something that takes precedence over prayer and that is my relationship to you.”

This is what we remember in worship. That resentment is a prison we construct ourselves. That forgiveness is freedom. That confession is the key. That when we seek genuine reconciliation, we can unlock the door and open the way to worship of God and relationship with one another. Now I do mean, because I believe Jesus did mean, genuine reconciliation. We know the other kind as well. *I'm sorry if you were offended, but... Well, I'm sorry that you're so sensitive.* Or frankly, just about any apology that begins, *I'm sorry, but...*

The chasm between us and the growing resentment among us make the way of Jesus both more important and more difficult. We live in a culture of contempt. And we know it. We sense it. We see and hear and perhaps occasionally are those whose resentment has become a raging fire threatening to consume them. Some of us refuse to acknowledge a hurt that we have caused. Others promise to exact revenge for past wounds. And so, the vicious cycle of abusive rhetoric and victimization continues unheeded. What will stop the madness? Come to the altar. Remember. Go and be reconciled. And only then, return to worship. When we are at the altar, when we are before God's righteous judgment and God's compassionate grace, we see our own failings in the light of divine mercy. We acknowledge our frailty and our brokenness and our limitation. And we commit ourselves to living another way.

This way is the example people of faith can set in a culture of contempt. By faith, we know the truth of what Sen. Alan Simpson observed at the funeral for President George H.W. Bush some years ago. Simpson said, "He knew what his mother and my mother always knew: that hatred corrodes the container it's carried in." We've seen enough corrosion to know there is a better way. A similar point put differently by author Anne Lamott: that refusing to forgive is like drinking rat poison and expecting the rat to die.

This summer, on my annual retreat in the mountains of North Carolina, I planned the themes and the

topics and the texts for worship this program year. The weeks beginning today, October 13, and ending November 3 took longer than any other season to discern. Where should we focus our attention these four Sundays? Which messages might resonate and be helpful for this moment and this congregation of well-intended, diversely minded folk? Briefly, I considered beginning next summer's sabbatical a little early. Only briefly. Then I thought about the possibility of entirely avoiding the elephant (or donkey) in the room. Perhaps we could have a series on the great historic doctrines of the faith, a careful study of the Apostles' Creed or consideration of varying theologies of atonement and salvation. No. The urgent and important work of the faithful in our time is to bear witness to the gospel of reconciliation. Jesus said it's the most important thing, that even if you are sitting in church, even if you are deep in prayer, even if you are standing on holy ground, you should go first and be reconciled. Not a metaphor. Not a parable. Take it literally. Take care of it. Do it now.

Imagine the power of forgiveness. Imagine the gift of confession, the freedom from guilt and shame, the release of a grudge held too long, rotting our souls and isolating us from each other. Perhaps there is someone whom you have been struggling to forgive. Perhaps there is someone whose forgiveness you have longed to receive. Friends, that relationship is too important to sacrifice on the altar of self-righteousness. My counsel is this: do not wait. This week, this afternoon, seek them out and be reconciled to one another. Embrace the power of forgiveness that will both reflect and shape your character.

Several years ago, in another congregation in another city, we had an evening service of prayer and communion on a weeknight during Advent. It was a small but committed group of worshipers who showed up. That evening we served communion by intinction. Worshipers came forward to receive the bread and the cup. Just before the service began, I realized that one of the elders who had agreed

to serve wasn't there. Quickly, last minute, I found another elder who happened to be sitting in the pews. I asked her if she'd be willing to serve that night, and she agreed. I showed her where she would be standing, and she looked at me with wide eyes and said, "I can't." *You can't? The service is about to start.* The elder looked down at the floor. "Okay, I'll do it." Worship began.

At the time of communion, the elders rose from their seats to take the bread and cup to serve, and she stood holding a chalice. She stood next to another elder in the church, and tears ran down their faces the entire time. After everyone received communion, these elders turned to each other. She put her chalice down on the table. Her serving partner did the same with the bread. Both were weeping. Standing there in front of the chapel, they reached out, and they hugged each other. Now I had no idea what was going on, but I too was weeping.

It was only after worship that I learned the story. Six years earlier, these two elders had been on opposing sides of a bitterly contentious issue in the church. They had spoken against each other in words that they both regretted. And since that time, they had not reconciled. Since that time, they had not spoken to each other. For six years, they had carefully avoided each other. But, that night, at the altar, they remembered. They forgave. They started over.

Friends, building character will mean making choices. Sometimes, they are excruciating. Confession. Forgiveness. Reconciliation. The very practices that might save us from ourselves and this culture of contempt, that could return us to the better angels of our nature.

It's going to take time to stitch us back together. Years. Perhaps decades. But here, at the altar, we can remember. We can begin right now.

So, this morning, if you are at the altar and you remember...well, you know what to do.