Last Sunday we ordained and installed people to serve as elders and deacons for this congregation. Prior to the installation service, each one had been examined by the session and one of the questions that they were asked to be prepared to answer for that exam was, “What are some of the Biblical passages or stories that have been especially meaningful in your life?” While I didn’t participate in the examinations, it’s fairly safe to assume that no one listed the passage from the Sermon on the Mount that we read a few minutes ago as a passage that had been especially meaningful in their spiritual pilgrimage.

Murder, anger, lust, adultery, divorce, swearing and oaths, liability, judgment, plucking out eyes when they offend could be, I suppose, the stuff of television and movies; they are not typically the stuff of our devotional lives. And yet today we are right in the thick of all of these things.

The text begins simply enough with a familiar command, one that is not necessarily hard for us to keep and one that just makes a lot of sense: “You have heard it said to those of ancient times,” Jesus said, “You shall not murder.”

But then Jesus complicates things, seemingly expanding the definition of murder rather broadly. “You have heard it said…you shall not murder, but I say to you 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 council…” And then Jesus continues telling us that the consequences of calling someone a fool are pretty dire indeed, and that if anyone has anything against us, or if we have anything against anyone else, we need to leave our gift at the altar and seek reconciliation immediately.

Jesus seems to be saying here that murder is not just taking a life, but that murder also includes anger, insults, and relationships that are not right. And the consequences of anger and broken relationships, Jesus seems to be saying, are as extreme as the consequences for taking another’s life.

While I doubt that many of us here are tempted to kill someone else, is there anyone here who has never been angry? Anyone here who has never insulted someone? Anyone here who has no one to forgive? No one we resent? We know about anger, don’t we?

Driving down Interstate 95 at rush hour on a summer Friday afternoon, and being cut off by another driver nearly creating a serious accident will cause anger. And perhaps in our anger we flash an ugly gesture, honk the
horn longer than necessary, shout out loud (or at least in our minds) some unkind words at the driver of the other vehicle. How can we help but be angry in such a situation?

And likewise, it would be nearly impossible not to feel anger if we were jilted only a couple of days before the prom by the person who was supposed to be our date. And how can we not be angry when a co-worker stabs us in the back, or we are bullied on the playground, or when we are called into our boss’ office with the news that our many years of hard work for the company is being rewarded with a lay off?

Anger! We feel it. We experience it. We know it. But Jesus seems to be equating anger with murder.

I think we can take heart, however, because although Jesus seemed to redefine murder to include anger, it doesn’t take much searching scripture to discover that Jesus himself experienced anger. For instance, if going into the temple and knocking over the money changers tables wasn’t an act of anger, I don’t know what it was. And for instance there was that time when there was a man with a withered hand that needed Jesus’ healing power, but it was the Sabbath and those around Jesus dared him to do it knowing he’d be in trouble if he did. Scripture itself tells us Jesus was angry then.

“You have heard it said…you shall not murder,” Jesus said. And then he went on to say that if we are angry, we are liable to judgment. And he continues by suggesting that if we have any need to forgive someone, or if we are harboring ill feelings about anyone in our hearts, or if there is any relationship in need of reconciliation, we should stop the service of worship in mid-stream, make peace and seek reconciliation before we pass the offering plates.

Now honestly, I’m not sure it would be particularly helpful to delay receiving the offering until we had all been reconciled to everyone. I don’t think delaying the offering would necessarily help us get past resentment and anger that may be inside our hearts, and I know it would truly have serious consequences for this church. I mean, if we waited to pass the plates until everyone had made up with everyone, wouldn’t the building fall into disrepair? Wouldn’t ministries that depend on our contributions be seriously hurt? And, if we didn’t pass the plates until everyone had forgiven and been forgiven and until we never got angry, how would we provide activities to nurture the faith of the child we just baptized?

The bottom line is that I’m don’t think that Jesus meant for us to take what he says about not passing the offering plates literally, any more than he intends for us in the next section to take his instructions literally about plucking out eyes or cutting off hands if we find ourselves desiring something that is not ours. Rather, I think Jesus may have been pushing us to grasp a larger point by use of graphic imagery, and as God’s people we are invited to discern the deeper truth behind his words.

As I reflect on this passage I think that Jesus is suggesting throughout this entire section of the Sermon on the Mount that we read this morning that what is in our hearts – the feelings, the hurts, the desires, the anger, the bitterness – will indeed inform our actions; and that what is in our hearts has the power to hurt. It has the power to hurt others; the power to hurt ourselves; and in the end, the power to hurt our relationship with God.

My colleague Mary Beth Davis shared a story with me this week about Da Vinci’s famous painting of the Last Supper. According to the story, when Da Vinci was creating this masterpiece he was at war with another painter. As a way of getting back at his enemy and making sure that this other painter would be marked for all time as his enemy, Da Vinci used that man’s face as the face of Judas. But when he tried to move on to paint Jesus’ face he wasn’t able to do it. No face for Jesus came to mind. His brush strokes weren’t making sense. As he struggled with putting a face on Jesus one day, he began to wonder if his inability to paint Jesus had something to do with the face he had put on Judas. At that point, he decided to put an end to the fight with the other painter, and he repainted the face of Judas so it was no longer the face of the man who had been his
enemy. And after he did that, Da Vinci discovered he was able to visualize a face for Jesus for his painting and he was able to complete the masterpiece.

I don’t know if the story is true or not, but it reminds me that it is probably not possible to be in right relationship with God when we are not in right relationship with others. Our relationships with others and our relationship with God are connected. And so as long as there are resentments remaining in our hearts, hurts festering souls, anger simmering inside us, we risk not just the relationship with another one of God’s children, but we put in jeopardy our relationship with God.

What is in our hearts matters. It matters to us. It matters to others. It matters to God. I do not believe that anger is always bad, nor do I think that is the point Jesus is trying to drive home. In fact, not only is anger not always bad, but sometimes we should be angry.

I think we should be angry when we find hungry children in our community, angry at the growing income inequality in this rich nation which is causing the poor to become poorer. I think we people of faith should be angry when we see wanton destruction of the environment, when people are abused by their spouses, when the church refuses to bless the marriages of same gender couples. I think we should be angry when people are dehumanized, victimized, terrorized.

But we have a choice with that anger. We can choose to let it destroy our peace and our souls, or we can choose to let that anger motivate us to change the world.

“Anger is just anger,” one writer says. “It isn't good. It isn't bad. It just is. What you do with it is what matters. It's like anything else. You can use it to build or to destroy. You just have to make the choice.” When we get hurt by another, we very well may be angry, but we have a choice with how we deal with that anger. Whenever we feel anger at a friend, a co-worker, a relative, a neighbor, someone we know well, or someone we don’t know at all, we have a choice. We can choose to let that anger sit in our hearts and fester, potentially destroying us, our connection with others, and impeding our relationship with God in the process. Or, we can choose to find a way to forgive, to find a way to reconcile, to find a way to restore that broken relationship, and to find not only a healed relationship with another of God’s children, but perhaps to experience as well the presence of God.

What’s in our hearts matters, you see. It matters not just to us, but it matters to the world around us. And, it matters to God.

Susan Andrews tells the true story of 2 farmers living in Canada. One day the dog of one farmer got loose and mauled to death the 2 year old child of his neighbor. The devastated father severed ties with the owner of the dog – and who could blame him – and the 2 men lived in cold, defiant enmity for many years. Then one day a fire destroyed the property of the dog-owning farmer, destroying his barn, his tractors, his plows, all his tools. The dog-owning farmer was not able to plow and plant his fields, and without crops his future was doomed. But one day he woke up and found all his fields had been plowed. They were all ready for seed. He wondered, “How did this happen?” “Who did this?” And he discovered that the grieving neighbor had plowed his fields. With all the humbleness he could muster, the rescued farmer approached his neighbor and asked, “Did you plow my fields, and if so, why?” And his neighbor and former enemy said, “Aye. I plowed your fields so that God can live.”

Yes, we will pass the offering plates this morning. And no, we aren’t asked to pluck out our eyes or cut off our hands, but we are called to seek reconciliation wherever relationships are tattered. And we are called to be a people of forgiveness even in the face of the unforgiveable. And we are called to treat those around us – friend, relative and stranger alike – with respect, care, dignity, honesty and love. And as we do we open the door not
just to healing in our own hearts and lives, but we open the door wide to God’s presence and God’s power among us.

Prayers of the People ~ The Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Creator of the cosmos and ever-present Spirit, help us to calm our fidgety minds and to slow our rapid pulse in order that we may sense your presence and perceive your purpose for our lives. Speak to us through the Scriptures, the voices of others, the experiences of our lives and the whispers deep within our soul, so that we may understand your blueprint for a rich life.

God, we pray that you will enlighten us to the wisdom of the radical teachings of Jesus. Help us to understand that sin begins long before it becomes visible in outward action. It takes root in the depths of our being when unkind thoughts and unchecked emotions find fertile soil. We pray that you will purge our hearts of venom, rid our minds of vengeance and cleanse our souls of vindictiveness. Then, grant us a thirst for what you have shown us is noble and virtuous and satisfying.

Gracious God, you have shown us that when our actions evolve from a heart of compassion and a desire for justice, we are in harmony with your ways. Prompt us to extend ourselves for the well-being of others and to strive for those things that enhance the common good.

Yet, God, we know that being in harmony with you does not guarantee that we will be in harmony with others. When we find ourselves at odds with someone, help us to focus our energy on what is right and life-enhancing, not on feelings of anger or revenge. Help us to be fair enough not to be merely self-serving, and firm enough not to allow greed or strife or deception to win the day.

Loving God, help us to focus on doing what is in our power to reconcile broken relationships. Prompt us to be patient so that we will not become irritated and annoyed when others fail to meet our standards. Inspire us to treat others with respect and dignity so that they and we may remember their value and worth.

Eternal God, you have not created us to be independent islands untouched by others. We are incomplete if we are unconnected; deficient if we are detached. Spur us to forge loving bonds, because the ties that tether us to others also draw us ever closer to you.

Now, hear us, as not alone, but together, we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying “Our Father…

NOTES

1. Matthew 5:21
2. Matthew 5:21f
3. Matthew 21:12-13
4. Mark 3:1-6
5. Jim Butcher, White Night