

“Cultivating Connection”

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Matthew 5:21-26 *‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; 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. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*

I need you to exercise your working memory this morning. I need you to hold onto one piece of information at the same time as holding onto other pieces of information. Have you ever done one of those MOCA memory tests? How bad a joke is it to say that maybe you have and you just don't remember taking it? Anyway, at the beginning of the test they give you five words — something like: face, church, velvet, daisy, red — and you are told to repeat and remember the words. And then they give you all sorts of other tests like drawing a clock and connecting the dots. Then at the end of the test they tell you “Now, repeat those five words!” We're going to do something like that this morning.

Last week we talked about being the light of the world, not as something we should be, but as something we are, in the context and through the lens of the opening passage of the Beatitudes:

³*‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴*‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

⁵*‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

⁶*‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

⁷*‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

⁸*‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

⁹*‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

I want you to be holding on to the Beatitudes as we add on more of what Jesus is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

“You have heard it said... but I say...” is the refrain that gets repeated several times in this section. *You have heard it said you shall not murder...* where have we heard that said? In the 10 Commandments — part of the Torah, part of the law. How are you with that one? My guess is that most of you are pretty solid on keeping that commandment. You can pat yourself on the back for doing well on that one.

Not so fast! You have heard it said you shall not murder, *but*, Jesus says: *“I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; 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.”*

Here I conjure my inner Scooby Doo and Shaggy and say: “Roh Oh!” And you respond “Like zoinks Scoobs!”

The point of the law, the Torah, is not that if you follow the rules precisely you will pass the test and get into heaven. The point is to facilitate having a good relationship with God and with people. If you think that being a good person simply means not murdering or not having an affair or not parking in an accessible parking space without a permit, if you think it's about following rules correctly and especially about following them better than those people, then you've missed the point.

I read a wonderful book this week that I recommend. It is called *Atlas of the Heart* by Brené Brown. In the book she introduces the concept of far enemies and near enemies. It's a Buddhist idea and a very helpful one.

A far enemy is the polar opposite. So, a far enemy of love would be hate. We are good at recognizing far enemies. When it comes to having good relationships and good society, we understand that the far enemies totally destroy and undermine the goals of good relationships.

But there are also near enemies, and the near enemies are sneaky. I think of near enemies as being those weeds in your garden that look so much like the plant you are cultivating that you sometimes miss the weed.

A near enemy of love is attachment or co-dependency. You can mistake it for love. But instead of real love, attachment has us clinging to the relationship or controlling the relationship. Attachment can make us sacrifice our own values and personhood for the sake of the relationship. The fuel for the relationship is fear, insecurity, shame — not love. My hunch is you know someone in a relationship like that. It's not a healthy relationship. That's a near enemy to love.

Without using the words "far and near enemy" that's what Jesus is saying here. Murder is the far enemy of life and connection. And it's good for us to name that. But if we only see the far enemy, we miss the near enemies that can choke out, undermine and be incredibly poisonous to life and healthy relationships. Jesus points to anger and insults as near enemies of life.

Now anger is tricky. Anger itself is not bad. I'm still learning that. It can be a warning signal that something is off. Sometimes anger is good and right. As Brené Brown says, anger is sometimes the most compassionate response to injustice. Anger can be a catalyst to change and to taking action.

When Jesus says "If you are angry with your brother or your sister" I wonder if a better translation would be "If you have a resentment towards your brother or your sister." Resentments are poison. They not only destroy relationships, they destroy you.

Forgiveness is the antidote to resentments. I like this quote I saw online:

"It took me a long time to understand what it means to forgive someone. I always wondered how I could forgive someone who chose to hurt me? But after a lot of soul searching, I realized forgiveness is not about accepting or excusing their behaviour. It's about letting it go and preventing their behaviour from destroying my heart."

Forgiveness is a choice you make, not a feeling you have. To let go of the past can lead to feelings of peace.

Next Jesus talks about insulting another and calling them a fool. So again, murder is the far enemy of life and connection, but a near enemy is contempt. John Gottman is a psychologist who has been studying marriage and partner relationships for the last 4 decades. He can tell with something like 94% accuracy which couples will make it and which couples won't. The key he says is whether the couple approach the relationship with kindness and generosity or with contempt, criticism and hostility.

Contempt is a lack of respect for the other person. Here's Google's definition: "*the feeling that a person or a thing is beneath consideration, worthless, or deserving scorn.*" You fool!

Contempt is not just poison for a marriage — it's poison for all relationships and connections. I heard that the level of contempt that Republicans feel towards Democrats and vice versa is at the same level as Israelis feel towards Palestinians (and vice versa). Think about that picture this week of the handshake between the Prime Minister and the Premier of Alberta.

Increasingly our affiliations with others are not based on shared values but on shared disdain and shared contempt for what *those* people are doing/believing.

When people are treated with contempt it can lead to shame, where a person feels they are not good and valued, or to feeling humiliated. A key difference between feeling shame and humiliation is that with shame a person tends to internalize and believe they are worthless. When someone experiences humiliation they believe they were unjustly treated, but it can be damaging and poisonous. The presence of these in our lives and in our world fuels actions of tremendous hatred. Studies of those who have perpetrated school shootings show that an overwhelming number have experienced humiliation. Interesting isn't it? While murder is the far enemy of life and connection, insults and contempt are a very dangerous near enemy and Jesus warns us of this.

Insults to a person especially at the level of shame and humiliation are tools of oppression, not justice. People don't change their ways, and it doesn't make them better people when they are shamed. Instead, people react with self-harm or by harming others.

We don't have to agree with people. We can be critical of policies or approaches, but be very, very careful that your criticism is of an action or policy and not directed at the individual in their personhood. This goes for couples too — you might critique how they load the dishwasher, but don't belittle the person. Don't go: "You're so dumb, you always or you never..."

Go and be reconciled.

Reconciliation. This is the heart of the message of Jesus. His whole life, his death and his resurrection were for reconnecting what has been disconnected.

What brings healing? What brings connection?

What did I ask you to remember through this sermon?

⁴ 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. That's connection.

⁷ 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. That's connection.

⁸ 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Connection with others, connection with God doesn't start out there with a rule book, it starts in our hearts. Connection does not come when we are busy proving our superiority, but with having the courage to share our weakness and our vulnerabilities. The connection comes when we see others and walk with them in their weakness and struggles.

We are called to have empathy, kindness and compassion. Here's another near and far enemy. The far enemy of compassion is to walk away and ignore the suffering of someone. But a near enemy is to pity them. Pity keeps us at a distance. It says "Oh poor you." "Thank God I don't live where you do!" "Thank God I'm not like you!" Compassion on the other hand has us seeing the pain and doing something. It sees and it leads us to loving action.

I love that a group jumped to action to hold a pot-luck dinner tomorrow night for Syria. Oh my heart. After a civil war that continues, pandemic, refugee camps — and

now an earthquake.

We have cultivated meaningful connections with Syrians in this community and so the suffering on the other side of the world has a face and hits closer to home. In 2015 when the world woke up to the crises of the Syrian civil war and the plight of so many refugees from there and other parts of the world, this community came together. The mayor at the time, David Henderson, called on the churches to come together and help. It was a wonderful cooperation between churches and the city and meaningful relationships have emerged from this.

Compassion literally means to be with someone in their suffering: com (with)-passion (suffering). I hope you consider making a donation. The Muslim Society of Brockville will give the money to aid groups with connections in Syria or to other organizations. If you e-transfer or write a check to the church and put “earthquake” in the memo line, it will go to the United Church who distributes emergency funds to trusted partner organizations on the ground in Turkey and Syria.

Sometimes there is not much that we can do except to stand with someone in their pain and in so doing say “you are not alone.”

May we have the courage to see the pain of others, may we have the courage to let others into our pain. May we know the presence of God — not a far-off rules God, but our Creator who became human and experienced suffering so that we might be free.

Thanks be to God.

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