

From the Mount

Sometimes a reading from scripture releases more rabbits than the preacher has hounds to run down. Or to put it another way, if today's sermon were to last three hours or so, I might be begin do justice to this morning's Gospel reading.

Presuming that you do not want to hear a three-hour sermon, I will do my best not to preach one, but I warn you: This sermon will fall short of the mark.

While this is true of every sermon, it is particularly true of sermons about the Sermon on the Mount. The Gospel writer Matthew has collected so many sayings of Jesus, and packed them so tightly into chapters 5, 6, and 7 that unpacking takes a lifetime, not a few minutes on a Sunday morning.

We can make a start, however, so let's start with something very familiar to us all: anger.

“You have heard that it was said to those of 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, 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.”

The ancient Greek language had two words for “anger.” The first was *thumos* which means the kind of anger that flames up in the heat of the moment and dissipates just as quickly. I imagine this is the kind of anger Jesus felt when he grabbed that whip of cords and ran the moneychangers out of the temple.

Clearly Jesus himself got angry. All of us do. I don't think Jesus is condemning the anger that comes from the encounter with injustice, nor is he consigning us to hell for having a bad day.

The other word in Greek for anger is *orge*. This is the kind of anger you nurse for a long time, the anger that fuels grudges, the smoldering anger that you have to feed in order to keep it warm. It's this kind of anger, this *orge*, that Jesus condemns. It's this kind of anger that leads to murder, he suggests, or at least to murderous feelings.

So if you're nursing a grudge, or you know someone who is nursing a grudge against you, don't think your worship of God is complete. Leave that gift on the altar and go and be reconciled with that brother or sister. Then come and offer your gift.

Clara Barton, the founder of the Red Cross, was having a conversation with a friend when the name of an old acquaintance came up. The friend reminded Clara that that person had been particularly cruel and vicious to her. "Don't you remember what she did to you?" the friend asked.

"No," Clara Barton replied, "But I distinctly remember forgetting it."

Having anger is one thing; *what you do with it* is another. Grudges and Gospel just don't go together.

Now we move from anger to lust. (I told you Matthew packs these sayings tightly.)

"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."

Jesus then proceeds, with characteristic hyperbole, to suggest that we should pluck out our eyes and cut off our hands to avoid sinful behavior that could land us in hell. I've always wondered what Biblical literalists do with this saying. If we were to take Jesus literally, heaven would be full of one-eyed, one-handed saints.

The Biblical scholar Frederick Bruner points out that the word Matthew uses here doesn't mean "look" in the sense of "glance," but "look" in the sense of "stare." He translates, **"But I say to you, every man who is staring at a woman in order to lust after her has already broken a marriage in his heart."**

Jesus was no aesthete. Like any good rabbi, he rejoiced in the goodness of creation, which includes the goodness of the body and the goodness of properly

ordered sexual relations. In this passage Jesus is not condemning sex. He is telling us not to treat other people as sexual objects, whether they be male or female.

Unlike the Pharisees and rabbis of his day, Jesus not only did not forbid the presence of women amongst his close followers, he welcomed women. He treated them not as objects of lust but as human beings made in the image of God.

Following Jesus' command was no doubt hard for those early disciples. I sometimes think that, compared to us, they had it easy. They didn't have to live in our sex-obsessed culture.

A recent study has found that while four in every five Christians believe pornography to be morally unacceptable, forty-seven per cent of Christians admit that pornography is a major problem in their home. Fifty-three percent of men who belong to the Christian group Promise Keepers admit to visiting porn sites on the internet at least weekly. (Baylor University).

Like anger, sexual feelings are unavoidable. They're part of God's good creation. But, like every good gift, sexuality can be misused. There are choices we must make. Martin Luther was fond of quoting one of the early church fathers, who said, "I cannot keep a bird from flying over my head. But I can certainly keep it from nesting in my hair or from biting off my nose."

It takes Gospel grace and Gospel discipline to keep sex in Gospel perspective.

First anger, then lust. Can we take on any more? How about divorce?

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

I have preached on this saying, as it appears in Luke and Mark, several times. I will say this about it today.

Divorce in Jesus' time had become abused in some circles. Women had become disposable property. According to some rabbis, a man could divorce his wife for burning supper or if he found her wanting compared to another woman.

According to Luke and Mark, Jesus forbade divorce on any grounds. According to Matthew, Jesus made one exception – *porneia*, which means sexual infidelity.

We must weigh this saying of Jesus with his other sayings, and with the overall witness of his life, death, and resurrection. That Jesus considered divorce a consequence of sin is clear. What is even clearer is that he loved us sinners. I find it impossible to imagine that Jesus would want women or men to remain in an abusive marriage, or that he would sanction the violence and exploitation that sometimes happens in a marriage gone bad.

Sometimes there is neither violence nor exploitation. Sometimes a couple grows apart and realizes that the terrible gap separating them is too wide to close.

Sometimes, in other words, a marriage dies at the heart, and when that happens there is every reason to grieve. But nothing, not even the death of a marriage, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. The God who hates divorce loves us with a never-ending love.

This is good news not only for couples who are divorced or divorcing, but also for those who love them as brothers and sisters in Christ. God loves us with a love that will not let us go. We are to do the same for one another.

Well, now. We've dealt with anger, lust, and divorce. Surely we've finished for the morning. There is one more matter to deal with, and that's telling the truth the first time.

The custom in Jesus' day was to swear on something sacred if you really wanted your oath to count. Gentiles were particularly prone to this, although Jews did it, too. Jews swore "by heaven" or "by Jerusalem" or even "by my own head."

As I recall, the standard oath of my boyhood was, "Cross your heart, hope to die, poke your mother in the eye."

Jesus will have none of this:

"Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for

it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

A Christian's "Yes" should mean "Yes" and a Christian's "No" should mean "No." Or to put it another way, Let the yes (or no) of your mouth match the yes (or no) of your heart.

One of the most worrisome aspects of Mr. Trump's young presidency is his habit of telling overt lies and maintaining them, even after the lies have been exposed. Whether it's the murder rate, or voter fraud, or the size of the inauguration crowd, the president seems to imagine that if you tell a lie and stick with it, people will eventually come around to accept your lie as truth.

And the bigger the lie, the better.

Telling lies can become habit forming. So can telling the truth. The lie imprisons us in a false reality. It's the truth, Jesus, reminds us in John's Gospel, that sets us free (John 8:32).

I have a preacher friend who tells me that he often ends his sermons by saying, "Well, I think that's enough for today."

We've covered anger, lust, divorce, and truth-telling. I think that's enough for today.