

Epiphany 6 A

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
5:21-37

Psalms 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew

After being baptized by John in the River Jordan and following the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus began a discourse of moral teachings we have come to know as The Sermon on the Mount. Two Sundays ago, we followed Jesus up the mountain and listened as He spoke about a number of blessings commonly known as the Beatitudes. Last Sunday, we heard Him say that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and today we listened to his teachings in which he eloquently presented a series of specific interpretations of the Law of Moses, beginning each statement with the words, “You have heard that it was said,” and concluding by saying, “but I say to you”.

Jesus uses the traditional teachings on murder, adultery and prayer to build his case for righteousness. He uses familiar teachings, but extends them into almost every area of life examining actions and behaviors such as anger, derision, slander, false generosity, litigiousness, arrogance, lust, temptation, alienation, divorce, and religious speech, shifting our attention from particular behaviors we must avoid to particular interior orientations we must cultivate. In doing this, Jesus, does not abolish but fulfills the law and exposes the easy truces we make even as we ruin the reputation of a neighbor or coworker through our words, or create primary relationships with work, sports, or even the internet, rather than our spouse.

One of the values highlighted in today’s Gospel is reconciliation. Jesus points out the negative impact of unresolved and conflicted human interactions, and offers a mechanism for accountability and a path towards mending broken relationships. For real reconciliation to occur, we must not only identify the offense, but also value the relationship that may be jeopardized by the offense. It requires an open dialogue and the restoration of the relationship that had been broken. God’s desire for us is that we live in harmony with one another. When our relationships are broken, other areas of our lives may become off-balance to the extent that, at times, it may impact our ability to function normally. When our relationships are broken, we become separated from one another, and in some ways, from God. The notion that we must reconcile with anyone who has something against us before we can give our gifts to God, causes us to stop and think for a moment. Jesus tells us that resentment, alienation, and estrangement from others, prevent us from even giving our gifts to God. He says that we should leave our gifts at the altar and go and be reconciled to that person.

Many times, we say or do things without thinking about the impact our words or actions may have on others. Our intent may be genuine, but the impact on others may be devastating, and sometimes, even when we are aware of it, pride may play a significant role, preventing us from reconciling with those we unintentionally hurt. But as Christians, we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are called to build bridges of reconciliation, not walls of separation.

Our nation today is experiencing an unprecedented amount of division and separation, much of which can be directly attributed to our recent election. Anger, fear and hostility planted by speeches, propaganda, and even by religious leaders have stoked fear and animosity towards other groups, uplifting one group,

while vilifying the other. It was just last week that many people in Norwalk and surrounding towns woke up to find flyers lying on their driveways or stuffed in their mailboxes with the slogan, “Make America white again.” The rhetoric from our politicians has caused a visible divide among families, friends, and communities. It is quite common now-a-days to hear friends “de-friending” each other on Face Book, Twitter, Snap Chat and other social media pages solely as a result of political debates or opposing points of political views, and beneath these widening divisions are ever increasing threats to the common good and to the great commandment that we love God and our neighbor. Is it possible for us to find common ground in spite of our differences? How can we agree to disagree, how may we, during these challenging and uncertain times, create spaces for dialogue and reconciliation?

It is hard and scary and sometimes may seem downright impossible. To reconcile with someone means to own our part of what went wrong. It means to be vulnerable and to open ourselves up to being hurt. While it feels better to hang onto what we perceive to be our righteous indignation because anger can be useful for us, inspiring us to action, it can also be destructive, causing us to do and say things we may later regret. There is a saying in twelve step recovery programs, “holding onto anger and resentments is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.” And there is incredible truth in this for all of us, not just for alcoholics and addicts. Barney Fife, a Deputy Sheriff in the slow paced, sleepy southern community of Mayberry, North Carolina in the Andy Griffith Show had a remedy for anger, “Nip it. Nip it in the bud.” Like weeds in the garden, anger is relentless and if we are not watchful it can take over, creating a box around our hearts that prevents us from loving and drastically reducing the quality of our lives.

But we have a choice. We can either choose to nurture what divides us and remain in a state of tension and dissension, or we can decide to be open to the movement of the Spirit and focus on God’s love which unites us. We can work together through our disagreements. Jesus came to this world to reconcile us with God. It is that ministry of reconciliation that encourages us to create spaces for healthy and productive dialogue, that urges us to remain faithful to our vocation of love where we reject sin while embracing the sinner.

A story is told of two brothers who lived on adjoining farms who a few months earlier had a serious disagreement. They had often shared their resources, but that practice stopped; and there was nothing left but bitterness. One morning, John, the older brother answered a knock at his door. It was a carpenter. The carpenter asked if there was any work to do. John said that there was something he could do. He took the carpenter to where the two properties met and showed him how the other brother had taken a bulldozer and created a creek where the meadow used to be. John said, “I know he did this to make me angry. I want you to help me get even by building a big fence so I won’t have to see him or his property ever again.” So the carpenter worked hard all day. When he reported back to John, John noticed there was no fence. The carpenter had used his skill and built a bridge over the creek instead of a fence. John’s brother saw the bridge and was quite moved that his brother would do such a thing. The two brothers met in the middle and embraced. They saw the carpenter packing his tools and asked him to stay a while and do more work. The carpenter replied, “I’m sorry, but I have other bridges to build.”

As a community of faith, we have a unique opportunity to break down walls and become bridge-builders during this troubling time in our history. We cannot just sit on the sidelines and feel sorry for those who are being disenfranchised or down trodden. We have a chance to sit and listen attentively to their perspective, to create spaces for conversations that may lead to reconciliation or even positive changes in the midst of disagreement or conflicting ideology. We have a chance to show our solidarity by walking with our disenfranchised brothers and sisters and by letting our voices be heard in powerful and unique ways, at the same time that we spread and teach the gift of reconciliation.

Jesus, our role model, was no stranger to confrontation, and he faced every conflict with determination and compassion. It is a healthy and necessary balance to mend and maintain challenging relationships. We need to take the initiative and instead of waiting for others to make things right, we should make the first move. Be the first to say “I’m sorry.” When we do this, we are saying, “you are important to me, this relationship is important”.

We are called to show love and compassion to those who are not so easy to love, and to ensure that the dignity of every human being is respected. Our disagreements, whether political, religious, or otherwise should not be sufficient ground to separate us. We are called to maintain a reconciliatory tone while challenging the injustices against God’s children in a way that fosters dialogue and builds bridges.

Reconciliation is something that we have to keep working at. It is never easy, but it is necessary. Amen.