

“Trigger Happy”
Matthew 5:20
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One of my favorite Mark Twain quotes is a statement he made about the Bible, he said: “I’m not troubled by the parts of the Bible that I *don’t* understand – it’s the parts that I DO understand that cause me concern.”

I thought of that quote as I looked into today’s Gospel reading from Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount. It’s not because Jesus used obscure and esoteric theological concepts that this a challenging text, but rather because he has given us such clear directions concerning the way of life that God calls each of us toward.

The Sermon on the Mount is full of teachings that connect directly and immediately with the reader. It is an accessible message that draws us in and offers a new way of thinking about how to orient our lives and carry out our devotion to God and neighbor. Most of the sermon is contained in Chapter 5 of Matthews gospel, and in it Jesus lays out a Christian ethic and a path to living in God’s kingdom that is all encompassing.

Gunther Bornkam, a German scholar wrote an essay in the 1950’s in which he described the Sermon on the Mount as a:
“volcano that erupts, or at least offers a menacing glow of fire, whose light reveals the precarious ledge upon which Christianity has settled down to a comfortable existence, and upon which unconcernedly it lets the flocks of its faithful graze.”

More than a half of a century later, Bornkam’s image of the precarious position the Christian Church occupies in relation to Jesus’ famous sermon continues to ring true. In some ways we do settle into a comfortable existence and avoid getting too close to the message and the rumbling of it’s revolutionary ideas. Like Mark Twain we know all too well what Jesus meant and it’s potential to shake things up in our churches and in our hearts.

Rather than hide from this teaching and graze contently upon the ledge where we are immune from its rumbling – I do think there are insights worth exploring if we let the volcano shake things up a bit. Firstly, the theme that arises in all of Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount embraces the awareness that a new day has dawned in relation to adherence to the law. The ancient system of religious prohibitions and rabbinical negotiating over legal requirements is thrust into a new perspective. What once engaged the believer in the pursuit of external standards has been reconfigured by Jesus into standards; matters of the heart.

Jesus introduces his teaching using what one scholar called a “not only – but even” approach: ‘not only does the law demand x, but Jesus demands even y.’ In this morning’s text, he presents the challenging idea that in addition to being governed by the prohibition against murder– even anger toward a brother or sister is considered problematic to the way of faith. Matthew records: “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.” Really? I was feeling pretty good about getting the ‘not committing murder’ thing down. But this teaching introduces a whole new and demanding dimension.

One biblical commentary I researched used an interesting phrase to describe this new dynamic in relation to the law. He noted that Jesus' teaching directs believers to "resist beginnings." The beginning of murder is hatred or anger toward a brother or sister. Murder can't happen unless there is anger toward someone in your heart. In the section that immediately follows, he follows the same theme noting that believers are told that the law prohibits adultery, and Jesus even warns against the lustful eye. Resist the beginnings; those first thoughts or triggers, that send us down a path of unrighteousness and cause pain to another or ourselves.

Applying this thought then, though we can say that most of us haven't murdered someone, we still must look at the ways we have carried anger toward a brother and sister in our hearts. Anger, resentment, revenge, judgment, they are the seeds that sprout into actions that hurt. They represent, to use a biblical phrase – 'roots of bitterness.' Actually biblical images abound about the need for renewal, and how we get off center – we become the seed that falls on dry ground, the clay that the potter can't work, the tree that cannot produce figs, the house built on sand. These images invite us to consider our connection with the ground of our being, our creator God, who has made us and shown us that love, life-giving love brings us closer to wholeness, while bitter angriness separates us from the hope of peace within our communities and within our hearts.

Can any of you think of ways you have felt this avalanche of anger get triggered and build up momentum? It can take on a life of its own. It may start with a perceived slight, or a snub, or even an insult. Often we feel a sense of injustice or unfairness that feeds the anger and opens the floodgates of resentment. When I served a church as a student intern, I recall being told by my supervising pastor not to bring up the fact that there were two men in the congregation who were brothers, but hadn't spoken to each other in years. When I explored what had happened, one of the wives said, "I'm not even sure anymore, but it began with the division of their mother's estate and John felt Jim wasn't being fair." Unfortunately I have encountered that type of story more times than I'd like to admit during my ministry. But I have also encountered remarkable accounts of the resilience of people of faith who have let go of tremendous grievances - some unimaginable hurts. People whose hearts have been transformed through their encounter with the living Christ's love and it lead them toward a life far better than one that harbored the seeds of anger.

In an insightful series of lectures entitled, "Getting Unstuck", Pema Chodron, a nun trained in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, illuminates the idea of resisting beginnings. She identifies the triggers that lead us down paths that hurt others and ultimately our own spirits. She calls that negative energy: 'shempa.' In true Buddhist fashion, Chodron outlines a practice to redirect ourselves when we first feel the urge to pursue an angry response, a hurtful comment, or judgmental critique. Her practice involves four R's:

Recognize the first impulse.

Refrain from going down the path or repeating the "story line."

Relax – breathe in the feeling of choosing a different path of action.

And last,

Resolve to do this process again and again and again. This need to keep at it, she insists, isn't a sign of us being bad, or fallen, or weak, but rather how strong the negative energy is once it starts to take root.

With all due respect to Pema Chodron, I would add another "R": Remember the Resource of the Spirit. While it's constructive to think of practicing a path that helps us resist the beginning of hurtful actions,

our Christian faith reminds us we also can draw close to the living presence of Christ who breathes into us his spirit and strength and makes all things possible.

I take great refuge in this promise of grace – the notion that the living spirit of Christ can transform us; the recognition that the living presence of Christ does this work in us, when we draw close to him. The closer you draw your heart around God’s word and Christ’s spirit, the more likely you are to stop doing the things that hurt or diminish others or your own self.

One of the first people to write about this experience of God in Jesus was the apostle Paul. He writes how the spirit of Christ can bring about our transformation in Romans 12:

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Eugene Peterson’s translation “The Message” adds a nice compliment to this passage, he writes: “Take your everyday, ordinary life--your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life--and place it before God as an offering" (Romans 12:1-8)

God wants us to offer us ourselves: our every day ordinary knee jerk reactions to life: how we interact with the people in the halls of our offices and schools, how move through the traffic on our sidewalks and streets, how we talk to our children and respond to our friends and reach out to strangers. God wants our minds to be transformed so that we can discern God’s will in any situation. God wants to change how we think so that we can leave behind the pride, resentments, wounds, and fears for the wide-open spaces of God’s peace where wholeness is found.

So let us offer up our hearts to the volcanic lessons from the Sermon on the Mount. Let us give our lives up as a sacrifice, so that transformation may take root. It takes intentionality and mindfulness to live in a way that carefully monitors our reactions to people, that respects the other and seeks reconciliation when we feel wronged. But this path is the path toward wholeness as God has intended it for us.

How wonderful that we find nourishment for this effort; that we have this community to support and encourage us. Will any of us get this right at all times? Will we ever be perfect? No. To pursue that would just replace one set of legalistic standards for another. But we can seek to grow closer to Christ and be in community around the qualities that he has shown us lead us to wholeness. And we can find sustenance for the endeavor at the table set out before us. Let the change begin, may we be courageous and hungry to find this new way of relating to God and each other.

Amen.