

Trinity 6

We heard today, in the Gospel passage from St. Matthew, Jesus say:

Ye have heard it said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment; but I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment....

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

Sometimes, when we read the Collect, Epistle, and Gospel for a given Sunday, we are left to wonder how they are connected, or even if they are connected

When we also consider the appointed lessons for Morning and Evening Prayer, oftentimes the connection seems even more distant.

Such is the case on this Sixth Sunday after Trinity, where we are faced with a seeming disconnect. The Collect concerns love; the Epistle seems focused on baptism; and the Gospel is about judgment.

In the Morning Prayer lessons appointed to coincide with the Eucharistic Propers, the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 57 talks of hope for those who are contrite, humble, and who put their trust in God; while the New Testament lesson from Second Timothy seems to be concerned with the Resurrection.

Though seemly disconnected — the Propers and the Morning Prayer lessons — we shall see that, in truth, they are all connected.

Now, while the Epistle, from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, focuses on baptism, which we have talked about on many occasions, in today's passage we can also see baptism as not only **the way** to becoming a Christian, but also **a uniting** wherein we are united to Christ in two special ways: first, we are united to His Death on the Cross and second, we are united to His Resurrection.

Indeed, with baptism, we become a completely different person, re-born into a new life of Grace, a new person united to Christ in the bond of Love.

Turning to the Gospel passage for today, from St. Matthew, we see on the surface the danger of judgment and the effect of failed reconciliation; but, looking more closely, we see the Sixth Commandment, "Thou shalt do no murder," re-interpreted to conform to the Law of Love.

We touched on that two Sundays ago, the Fourth Sunday in Trinity, when we focused on the Gospel from St. Luke and the text:

Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

Here, we looked at mercy being of all our human traits the most positive, while being judgmental and hypocritical being the most negative and most destructive.

One thing that is most apparent is that Jesus not only spoke with authority, but He also set a new standard of conduct in relation to the Law of Moses with His Law of Love.

For the Jews, in particular the Scribes and Pharisees, the Law was holy and given by God; it was everlasting, unchangeable, unshakeable. But, here, in this particular passage from St. Matthew, Jesus was seen as contradicting the Law and substituting His own teaching in its place, correcting its inadequacies out of His own wisdom, correcting these most sacred writings in the world.

That Jesus was taking the unchangeable Law of Moses and making it His is even more evident in today's passage when He says:

....but I say unto you that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment...

While addressing the Sixth Commandment, "Thou shalt do no murder," Jesus, in a broader sense, transforms it from the strict Mosaic Law into the Law of Love.

In the oral tradition of the Torah, there was the concept of "fences," which was essentially the formulating of practices and observances in regard to the Commandments to fence them off in order to bring attention to them and make it more difficult to disregard and disobey them, thus creating the myriad of rules and regulations of the Jewish Law.

In His own way, Jesus also used this concept as the example of the Sixth Commandment demonstrates — fencing it off.

Under the Old Law, the Mosaic Law, punishment was meted out in proportion to the severity of the outward crime. Our Lord, however, focuses on the spiritual aspects of the Law, focuses on the evil attitudes and motives that are the source of the overt acts of wrongdoing.

For Jesus, the Law was not just a code for external conduct; there was a spiritual side of each Law given by God to Moses. He emphasizes that what is in the heart is not only as important as the external, but is also the source for how we act, how we conduct our lives.

Jesus uses the Sixth Commandment, to do no murder, to illustrate this new concept to His disciples, “fencing off” the Sixth Commandment.

He says that in the sight of God, murder is not just a physical act, but is also a spiritual act resulting from anger, hatred, malice, and an unforgiving and un-reconciling spirit. Even malicious gossip is murder, as it wounds the heart and kills the spirit.

Jesus illustrates to His disciples how they should understand and practice the Law as it relates to murder, condemning the emotion of unreasonable anger as a crime in itself. The language of the passage from St. Matthew is rhetorical, intending to mark that immense gulf that separates the "morality of the Law from the morality of the Gospel."

It is helpful to understand that whenever Jesus refers to the scribes, He is referring to a small body of men, who not only expounded the law, but also taught it in schools and administered it as assessors in the courts of justice.

As for the Pharisees, they were the whole body of orthodox believers living a separated life and observing a thousand precautions to avoid any possibility of the least contamination by heathenism.

In examining this parable, we find first that Jesus uses the words "They of Old Time," as referring to the old Dispensation, or Old Covenant.

He uses Raca, an Aramaic word that means "empty" or "empty-headed," an expression of gross contempt, regarded as libelous and actionable.

The term "the council" may refer to the Sanhedran at Jerusalem, but most likely refers to a court consisting of 13 members that met in the local Synagogue. Every town with a population of 129 or more had a local council, who were competent to try all charges, including capital charges.

Other terms include: "Thou fool" or "thou wicked and godless man," quite offensive in Aramaic, probably as equally offensiveness as "Raca;"

And "hell fire," literally the "Gehanna of fire," considered to mean "the place of final punishment."

As the parable unfolds, we see a new commandment forbidding the indulgence of passions that may result in murder, with the focus on anger.

We are reminded that righteousness must come from the heart, not from merely an outward compliance with the law as in the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

Under the old Dispensation, the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" was punishable by the local councils or even the Sanhedran, as a physical, external act; but under the New Covenant, the passions that flow from intense anger result in a spiritual form of murder that incurs Divine Judgment.

In declaring unreasonable anger as a crime in itself, Jesus asserts His opposition to the whole spirit of Judaism of His day, which emphasized the physical law and conformity to external codes.

Distinguishing the range of the human emotion of anger, in its mildest form expressed by the word "Raca" and punishable by the local court, from its more abusive form expressed as "Thou fool," punishable with eternal hell fire, our Lord is telling us that anger can only be mastered by those who feel themselves responsible to God.

There is no doubt as to the necessity of reconciliation and making amends; to be reconciled to your neighbor before it is too late and you face not just temporal consequences, but also Divine Judgment and eternal punishment.

In considering the verses from St. Matthew, we can conclude two reasons for the importance and necessity of restraining anger:

First, anger impedes prayer and interferes with the true worship of God, making such worship impossible.

Secondly, uncontrolled emotions, such as anger, may lead to broader consequences, resulting in irreconcilable antagonism spreading to friends, family, communities, even the world.

We can see the value of this lesson today. So much conflict among and within nations. We see a seething anger, passionate and uncontrollable, that can destroy a nation, devastate communities, separate and decimate families, and turn friends into foes.

There are many examples of this throughout the world, but we don't have to look far; we can look in our own backyard to see the same seething anger that causes ruin to communities and destroys lives.

Anger is one of the basic human emotions that not only over-shadows love and true righteousness, but also obscures them and separates us from God.

Anger and resentment require considerable energy and are spiritually draining.

But, Jesus says to us there is hope and a way; that way is by reconciliation; first reconciling ourselves to those for whom we have felt anger and making amends; then, with the help of God through the working of the Holy Spirit, we can bring our passions, our anger, under control and aspire unto true Righteousness that comes from the heart.

What He is telling us is that Christianity is not only our belief in Him, Jesus Christ, as the Son of God and our Lord and Saviour, but it is also a way of life, a way of living, a way of conducting ourselves and our lives, with Jesus Christ as our foremost example.

Our road to salvation is in keeping in our hearts not only the Sixth Commandment, but all the commandments in the spirit our Lord intended, first by embracing the Love of God in our hearts, indeed transforming our hearts to be a proper abode for the Holy Spirit.

Christ has “fenced off” the Ten Commandments with a new Law, the Law of Love.

Thus, we can see in the Propers for today, coupled with the lessons appointed for Morning Prayer from Isaiah and Second Timothy, a thread that weaves it all together; that thread is Love.

What unites us to Christ is love. Just as the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are bound together by Love, so are we bound to God by the love expressed through Jesus Christ.

Being at one with Christ, there is no room in our hearts, in our lives, for anger and resentment; no room for being judgmental; no room for hypocrisy as we are transformed by the Law of Love.

We are further united to our Lord and Saviour each time we participate in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, a sacrifice of love, by receiving the bread and wine as outward symbols, which through the miracle of the consecration become His Body and Blood; even if that Communion is only spiritual, just by our presence at His Table, we are united to Him.

The mystical union of Christ and His Church includes us as members of that Body. Though we may find some solace and peace outside of corporate worship, our true calling is to worship Him corporately as a loving family, a family in Christ, at the foot of His earthly Altar.

When we come together corporately to worship God, we are not alone; we are joined together with the Angels, Archangels, and all the company of heaven, all the saints, all the faithful departed and those present in the body, the whole Church in heaven and on earth, in praise and thanksgiving. We are at one in Christ united through His Love.