

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 5:21-37

“Relationships”

I sometimes wonder and think about just what it must have been like to be alive in Jesus' day? There were Romans insulting Jews, Samaritans attacking Jews, Jews fighting back, different Jewish parties insulting and attacking each other. Sounds kind of familiar, doesn't it? Living in an occupied land must have made the people somewhat insecure. Many times what prevents all-out war is exhaustion and poverty. People often take their public anger back into the home. The person whose boss has shouted at him or her goes back to his own office and shouts at the secretary. The secretary goes home and shouts at the children. The children shout at the cat or dog – or even worse. If part of maturity is learning how to recognize your anger, dealing with it before it gets out of control, we could probably conclude that most folks are not very mature. In last week's Gospel Jesus said that Israel is called to be the light of the world, (remember – 'be salt' - *"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden."* (Matthew 5:14)) - then the question needs to be asked - how can anger be defused, and prevented from turning into violence? That very same question needs to address what is going on in our country today! There is a great deal of anger – that if it goes unchecked - this county is going to face a lot worse.

I think it could all begin with smoldering anger against someone who might be close to a person. And while it may not result in murder; the point of the 6th Commandment was not that you should stop just short of killing someone, but that you should never even get near the thought of wishing that person were dead in the first place. It is not even to enter in to our mind: just like Jesus (and Jimmy Carter) said that if you lust after someone in your mind – it is the same as having done it already. God's judgment is not something that will catch up with you eventually, but rather a judgment that will begin right now. Every time a person decides to let anger smolder inside, they are becoming a little less than fully human – belittling themselves. Letting anger turn into foul and abusive language, might find someone in court. If they are the sort of person who sneers at everybody and calls them names, the fire inside may eventually become all that's left of them, just as Gehenna (or hell)–the smoldering garbage dump outside the walls of ancient Jerusalem – right by the Dung Gate. It makes sense, especially after we talked about the ovens and the salt. It was a hot place, the hottest place that people could imagine. And so the image was that that was what Hell was like, and it might take over completely. So – what is the alternative? Jesus offers us two very specific and practical commands:

- Get it resolved;
- and make friends.

That is not easy – and probably at great cost.

I sort of troll Facebook, and I am amazed at some of the comments that people make about friends – often bringing people together again after long absences in their lives. It is not easy – and sometimes it can be costly. It involves climbing down off of a high pedestal on which we have placed ourselves - doing away with the feeling of superiority over the person they are angry with. The reality is - humans don't live on pedestals; they have their feet on the ground,

on a level with everybody else. The hard truth of the matter is - reconciliation takes priority even over worship! You are probably saying 'what are you talking about Fr. John?' In today's Holy Gospel - Jesus speaks of someone getting all the way into the Temple courtyard, buying a sacrificial animal on the way, and suddenly remembering as approaching the altar, the presence of the loving and holy God- some relationship that has gone wrong.

It takes about three days to travel back to Galilee, where most of Jesus' followers lived. He gives a view of an anxious worshipper leaving a live animal sitting there in the Temple courts for a week while they scurried back home, apologized to the offended person, and then returned to Jerusalem. He seems to be exaggerating to make the point. The point Jesus is making is that we each have to live, day by day, so that that when you come to worship there is no anger between you and your neighbor, your sister, or your brother, your father, your mother – the person who might be sitting next to you in the pew. Jesus says if you don't reconcile you and a neighbor are actually going before a judge to fight out your legal differences. He says don't even let it get to court. Settle it before hand, or you might end up in jail and paying every penny you have. This is good advice, but it most likely reaches far beyond mere lawsuits. Israel in Jesus' day was in real trouble, oppressed by Roman pagans from outside and by rich aristocrats from inside. In some cases many Jews longed for their day in God's court when they would be proved right and their enemies would be overthrown. Jesus says don't even think of it like that. In essence Jesus wants us to make friends, not enemies.

Later in Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus gives us further instruction about relationships: *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."* Those are mighty words!

Jesus had quite a lot to say about relationships, and He wants us to resolve our differences, and not judging one another – being overly critical – and not constructively. Constructive criticism can sometimes hurt – but it is for a good reason, and hopefully it is given with love. I might add that He meant this not just for casual relationships, but He said this for ALL relationships – even marriages, which sometimes fall apart – but need to have a civility in the parting. Jesus did say that sometimes it is with very good reason that a certificate of divorce is given – and we don't need to go into details about that today. He said later in this Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:1-5 *"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."*

Aside from critical speech and thought - Jesus was adamant about forgiveness. He said quite clearly that in order to receive it – you have to give it. Forgiveness, mercy, and love go hand in hand! You might remember that recently I spoke about Michael W. Smith's song "Give It Away" in which he sings 'love isn't love until you give it away.' In what we have labeled the Lord's Prayer – Jesus teaches us to ask our Father to "*Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*" (Matthew 6:12-15) Jesus put it another way when He told us in Mark 11:25-26 "*And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.*"

I will take it another step further – before we are going to offer forgiveness to others – we, each one and every of us, must first forgive ourselves. There is not a person in this room today that has at some point in their life done something that they are not proud of, maybe even ashamed of. Can you truly say today - that you have given that to God and asked Him to forgive you – totally and completely? If you are still carrying that baggage around – today, right now – give that or those things to Jesus, laying them at the foot of His cross – where He died so that you might be freed from the pain, the sin and the shame that goes along with it. Jesus' sacrifice was enough to cover, actually – more than enough, to cover through His precious blood – anything that you may have done, that I may have done in my life! I stand before you today and there are some things in my life that I am not proud of that I have done – you see I am a sinner too, but I stand before and I have, and I can honestly tell you that I have laid them at the foot of Jesus' cross and sought His forgiveness - and know without a shadow of a doubt, because of His love and His sacrifice, that I am free from that guilt. The enemy wants to take it and dump it on your shoulders and not let you forget about it. Jesus' sacrifice was enough to cover anything. It is not doing you any good to be carrying that weight around on your shoulders – and giving the enemy something to remind you of. There is often a scene in movies with a devil on one shoulder – whispering in your ear – and an angel on the other should – whispering in your other ear. I am here today to tell you to tell the devil to get out of your life – to stop trying to remind you!

In just a few minutes we will have our time of confession and absolution – take that opportunity to rid yourself of "things done or left undone." That includes asking God to give you the strength to forgive people for things that they may have done to you and you have never, ever let go of it. It may very well be someone who is no longer alive – but you can give that to Jesus with forgiveness in your heart and be free of that weight too. Jesus Himself, hanging on the cross asked His Heavenly Father to forgive those who did the most horrible things to Him and killed Him. Jesus said, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*" (Luke 23:34) Those are not words for just Good Friday – but words that we need to remember every day. Even behind the wheel – that's when some of us show a lot of "stuff" to others.

Throughout this Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not just giving us moral commands to follow. He is unveiling a whole new way of being in relationship with others. It is no wonder that to some it looks strange. But Jesus Himself pioneered it, He lived it, and He invites us to follow His example.