

February 12, 2017 – 6th Sunday after Epiphany



"The Art of Avoiding Hell"

Sermon by Rev. Larry Young

Matthew 5:21-24

"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. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Some of you will remember a scene in the movie "Gandhi" in which a Hindu man comes to Gandhi to argue why he would keep fighting against the Moslems, despite Gandhi's campaign to end the fighting. "The Moslems took my little boy and crushed his head," said the Hindu man; "and so in turn I took a Moslem boy and killed him in the same way." And then the Hindu comments sadly, "I have been living in hell." Gandhi reflects quietly a moment, and then he replies softly, "I think I know a way out of hell. Go and find a boy similar to the one the Moslems killed—take him into your home as a son—and raise him as a Moslem."

Today's reading from Deuteronomy reminds us that we humans are always confronted with choices—between heaven and hell, blessing and curse, life and death—in the everyday events of our lives. And it matters much which choices we make, even when in the moment we may not recognize the choices for what they are. So just as Gandhi urged the Hindu man to opt for a way out of hell, so the Deuteronomy author says, "Choose life, that you and your descendants may live." Why opt for hell when you can have heaven?

In today's reading from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus brings this matter of choice down to the level of our personal relationships. When differences with others provoke us to anger, how do we respond? The issue is not in being angry; Jesus himself showed anger on more than one occasion. But how do we respond to our anger? For Jesus the path to hell begins with staying angry with another without trying to resolve it. While it's not the same as murder, it still puts one under judgment. We might say that makes it at least a municipal court offense. Adding insults can bring it up to a superior court offense; and branding the other as a fool, as one not worthy of your respect, puts you at the door of hell. To the Jews of Jesus' time a fool was seen as one so ungodly as to be even beyond the pale of God's love—total scum, in other words. But still these are only words. Why then does Jesus treat them so seriously? Is it not because such words do in fact have the power to tear down people and destroy relationships? God's will is always on the side of relationships that enhance and build up human life. So vengeful anger can be the functional equivalent of murder from God's perspective. And as we know, the judgment is not only in the mind of God, but it can also be in the kind of personal hell that can come from our alienation from others. Like the Hindu man who came to Gandhi, we may experience the hell of being caught up in the animosity and antagonism of our vengeful feelings. It's not a happy way to live.

We're all aware of living in a time when this kind of animosity pervades the public arena. This is not a happy time in the life of our nation; and we know the deep-going differences in cultural and moral values and political philosophy that underlie it. And the differences are not going to just go away. But surely we must ask, even given our differences, is there not an alternative to the hellish climate of animosity that we find ourselves in today? Can Jesus' teaching point the way to a climate more of blessing than of curse?

We know this will not be an easy process—and it won't happen "out there" apart from us. How we relate to one another and how we approach our differences has everything to do with making for positive change. To the extent that we refuse to live in the hell of animosity, we will be making our personal contribution to a more harmonious world.

And I think we all know in our heart of hearts where we have to begin. The beginning point is our belief that every human being is a beloved child of God and must be respected as such. We will often disagree with others and may think them totally wrong-headed—because of course we're so sure we have the truth. And we want to believe that it's God's truth as well. On Lincoln's birthday today, I'm reminded of an instance when Lincoln attended a church meeting at which a member argued for a particular cause and closed by piously trusting that "the Lord is on my side." Lincoln responded, "I'm not concerned whose side the Lord is on. But it matters a lot to me that I should be on the Lord's side!" Well, we may or may not be on the Lord's side in whatever truth we claim. Those who differ from us may have a piece of that truth as well. In any case we have no license simply to

write off those we disagree with as fools unworthy of our basic respect. Every human being has worth in God's eyes.

Second, as we have opportunity, we can try to speak our truth in love. When someone has said or done something that angers us, letting the other know what has upset us is far better than just stewing about it, even if the fracture in relationship is not resolved. We at least have created the possibility of bridging the gulf. I admit to being a regular reader of the Ask Amy column in the newspaper. Again and again, people write Amy about how they are at odds with someone and don't know what to do about it. And again and again Amy's advice is, go to the other person and tell them what your beef is, and see if together you can work it out. Now of course it's likely to work out better if you wait until you've cooled off a bit and can speak more in love and respect than in anger. The purpose here is not to dump your anger on the other, which is almost sure to backfire. Rather your goal is to get rid of the barrier that has come between you, to bridge across it so the two of you can be in a good place with each other once more. Hopefully your caring to confront lets the other know of your goodwill and invites the other to respond in a similar vein.

In the public arena we often don't get the opportunity to engage with those who differ from us, in a setting where respectful sharing of differences can happen. The more this can happen, the more today's divisive climate is likely to be mitigated as we come to better understand what's behind our differing positions. I rejoice in the opportunities provided in this congregation to engage with those with different viewpoints and urge you to take advantage of them as you are able. But whether we are able to have these encounters, the attitudes we take toward differing others matters a great deal. Our gut level instinct may be to demonize them, to write them off as meriting no respect from us, to simply vent our animosity toward them. But friends, that's only going to add to the hell of today's antagonistic climate. As Jesus' followers we're called to be better than that.

The writer Deborah Smith Douglas tells of her experience in the aftermath of the bombing at the Boston Marathon. Like many in Boston, she didn't sleep that night, but rather kept pacing in her small apartment, filled with fear at the hatred and violence that had been unleashed. Looking out her window at the darkness, she wondered what she could do about it. She describes her experience in these words:

"So I stood in that window—like a radio operator behind enemy lines—or like a lighthouse in a storm—trying steadily, with all my small strength, to send out an opposing signal—a beam of light to pierce the darkness. As grandiose as it sounds now, that night I felt compelled to choose a side, plant a flag, take a stand in that window for life against death, for love against hate. Alone, but powerfully bound to others whom I knew must be praying too, across the city and around the world."

Friends, I think that's the kind of outlook that can move our society toward positive change. Rather than giving in to our fears and stewing in our anger, we too can resolve to take our stand for love against hate and refuse to be a part of the divisiveness and animosity that surrounds us.

Yes, it's going to be hard work—and hard especially because of how it goes against the kind of emotional hold that anger can have on us. Our anger often feels righteous, and in that moment our choice of blessing or curse can get distorted. But Jesus reminds us that the path of life lies in moving past our anger toward reconciliation, to whatever extent possible. The art of avoiding hell is working to bridge the gulfs that separate us from others—for that's where we will find life—for ourselves, for others, and for the whole human family. Amen.