
Turn and Go Be Reconciled

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A sermon by the Rev. Canon Wallace Marsh

I remember standing on the mountain overlooking the beautiful Sea of Galilee, imagining what it must have been like to hear Jesus' words: "Blessed are the poor in spirit. , Blessed are those who mourn. , Blessed are the meek. ," I could see the people mesmerized by those words and then horrified to hear what Jesus says next: "If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. , If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away."

How did they interpret those words? Furthermore, how do we interpret them?

Were we to read scripture literally, my options for titling today's sermon would have been, "Pieces of Me" or "Cut's Like a Knife." Thank goodness, Episcopalians do not read the Bible literally, or we would be in a bloody mess (pun intended).

However, we live in a time when many Christians claim to read the Bible literally, often with a self-righteous indignation; that is until they encounter a text like the gospel reading we have today. The passage before us today tends to bring about a more liberal interpretation, even from among the biblical literalist.

But there is also a strand of the Christian tradition that wants to gloss over this text. These Christians would prefer to focus on the beatific parts of the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor, Blessed are the peacemakers, Blessed are those who hunger after righteousness, Blessed are the pure in heart ..."

This type of Christian has the tendency to turn the Sermon on the Mount into a first century Woodstock: Peace, Love and Joy"baby that's what it is all about. Maybe they are correct; it might be about peace, love and joy, but the difficult sections (such as the one before us today), offer insight on how we apply Jesus' sermon to our lives.

Notice, today's gospel is all about human relationships. We hear about murder, anger, lust, adultery, divorce and lying"things that we do to each other. Jesus draws our attention to the painful and sinful aspects of the human condition, speaking to the reality of our lives, and more specifically, to our broken and complicated relationships. And as you can see, what Jesus says isn't easy to hear, it's often difficult to interpret, and even more challenging to apply to our lives.

How lucky I am to be the priest assigned to this text. And the luck continued when I realized it falls on the Sunday after Valentine's Day! Perhaps my wise remarks in staff meeting have finally caught up with me?

The other day when all of Atlanta was on house arrest, I decided to listen to a lecture by John Gottman, a well-known psychologist and the author of many books about marriage and parenting. John Gottman was named one of the top ten most influential therapists in the last quarter of a century.

John Gottman's interest in studying relationships came because he was having horrible luck dating women. He figured studying relationships would bring professional and personal success.

Success came professionally ,

Gottman landed a job at The University of Washington and they gave him the resources to create a "love lab" on campus. Yes, you heard me correctly, a "love lab."

John Gottman and his colleagues turned a beautiful apartment overlooking the river into a bed and breakfast where couples could spend the weekend. There was "a catch" to the weekend away. The couples were surrounded by cameras and were forced to wear monitors to check their heart rate and skin temperature. Gottman and his team were seriously studying relationships. They figured if you put couples in a confined space for a few days conflict was going to occur. (If you spent this week snowed in with someone you love, you understand what Gottman was trying to capture!)

After a weekend in the love lab, Gottman would sit down with the couples, and like a Monday morning quarterback, he would replay the video of their arguments, show them their heart rates and skin temperatures, and ask them what they were feeling or thinking during those tense moments. Hundreds of hundreds of couples came through the love lab, enabling John Gottman to create a framework by which he could predict divorce with a high amount of accuracy. It was groundbreaking research.

Success also came personally, as John fell in love and married a psychologist named Julie. And this relationship caused his research to change.

One day Julie said to John, "you have made a great career and had a lot of success watching relationships fall apart; don't you think it is time to use this research to help others?" Thus, they began to write books and created The Gottman Institute as a means of helping strengthen marriages.

Much of what Gottman says can be found in today's gospel text: The brokenness in our relationships has something to do with how we handle our anger. It has something to do with what (and who) we desire, and it has something to do with the manner in which we speak to each other. Jesus says, "let your yes be yes and your no, no."

Remember, the Sermon on the Mount takes place just a few verses after Jesus calls his disciples. Why is that important? Jesus calls those disciples into a new relationship. Thus, Jesus' sermon needs to address the importance of nurturing healthy relationships.

Healthy relationships are a result of our ability to work through anger, conflict and desires that drive us apart. If we can't manage those things it all falls apart; something many of us know all too well.

In one of his books, John Gottman has a chapter titled, "Turn Toward Each Other Instead of Away." In today's gospel, Jesus is asking us to do the same thing. Jesus says "leave your gift at the altar and go be reconciled." Leave it and turn toward the other.

Jesus is asking us to do the hard work of reconciliation, because that is what Jesus' life is about, and what it means to be His disciple. Christians are people who believe in reconciliation. However, turning toward the other and reconciling is not an easy thing to do. If on the cross Jesus reconciles the world to God, then his example shows us that reconciliation can be painful; "cutting and tearing" and sacrifice might be a part of the process.

What we do know as Christians is that every one of us is in need of reconciliation. Yet, we are all very different. We have different backgrounds, different stories, and our journey toward reconciliation will be different than the person sitting next to us.

The good news is that this season of Epiphany is about that journey.

Epiphany began on January 6th with three wise men following a star that led them to a manger where they encountered the Son of God. You remember how the story goes. The wise men are warned in a dream not to tell Herod the location of Jesus, so the wise men pay homage to Jesus, and like today's gospel, they leave their gifts at the altar and they turn toward home. Matthew says, after leaving gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, "they left for their own country by another road."

Let me conclude with bit of irony: One of John Gottman's contributions to the field of relationships is knowing your spouse's "Love Map." Gottman says for relationships to deepen and flourish you must have a "Love Map," because each of us needs to discover and learn new roads.

One of main points of Jesus' sermon: Following Him involves walking different roads when it comes to our relationships.

Like the wise men, let us leave the presence of Jesus (let us leave this altar) and turn toward the other. Perhaps it is time to walk a new road in some of our relationships. And remember, the wise men were warned "sometimes the old roads aren't the best way home!"