

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity – Pr. Faugstad sermon
St. Matthew 5:20-26: “Blessed Are the Peacemakers.”
July 23/24, 2022 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Holy and righteous God, teach us to know the seriousness and severity of Your Law, so that we see our sin and truly repent. And teach us to believe in Christ’s fulfilling of the Law for us, so that we receive the adoption of sons and have the Law written in our heart. Pour out Your love in our hearts by Your Holy Spirit for Jesus’ sake. Amen. (Laache, *Book of Family Prayer*, p. 464)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus’ name:

[Jesus said:] “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. / “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. / “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.” (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who reconciled us with God and grants us the gift of reconciliation with others, dear fellow redeemed:

When a star athlete, a talented actress, or a top student takes his or her talents to a larger community, it can often be a humbling experience. These individuals were the best in their hometown, but they find that things don’t come so easily on the big stage. They thought they were pretty good, but they learned they were not good enough.

Jesus told the crowd that had gathered around Him while He taught from the mountainside, “*unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*” The people may have thought they were living a good life before God. They were trying to do what was right. They were at least as good as those around them. They maybe weren’t on the level of the scribes and Pharisees, the people who dedicated their entire lives to learning and doing the Law of God. But they were doing okay.

Jesus sent the clear message that their level of righteousness was insufficient. Even the scribes and Pharisees were not good enough to stand before God. He told the people their

righteousness needed to *exceed* the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. To illustrate His point, Jesus brought up the Fifth Commandment: *"You shall not murder."* The people knew that if they committed murder, they would have to go on trial in a human court. But as long as they did not murder, they imagined they had kept the commandment.

"Not so," said Jesus. "This commandment is not kept by outward actions alone. It must be kept in the heart. *I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.*" The people were completely shocked. They had never heard the Law explained in this way. If what Jesus said was true, then no one was righteous before God. If what He said was true, then they were guilty of sinning against the Fifth Commandment and all the rest of them.

To amplify His teaching, Jesus offered some examples of what keeping the commandment should look like. In this part of His sermon, He switched from addressing the crowd as a whole—using plural pronouns—to speaking to individuals, personally—using the singular pronoun. "This is for each one of you to consider in your own heart," He was saying, including you and me today.

Jesus spoke about what to do when we have wronged another person in some way. When we remember an offense we have committed in our words or actions, we should seek to be reconciled with the one we offended. Our memory might especially be jogged as we listen to God's Word. Jesus said when *"you are offering your gift at the altar,"* when you have come to hear the Word of God and glorify His name, that is when the memory of an offense may come to mind. The Holy Spirit works through the Word to convict us of our sins, which He is also doing today.

When our sins are not illuminated by the bright light of God's Word, it is easy to think we are doing pretty well, like the people who first listened to Jesus so many years ago. The people in our community who have rejected the regular hearing and learning of the Word generally have the opinion about themselves that they are "good people." They don't need some preacher telling them what he thinks about God or about them.

Apart from God's Word, it is also easy for us to justify the wrong things we have done or said or thought. "Well maybe I could have treated him better, but he treated me much worse!" "She doesn't deserve Christian love and compassion after what she has done!" "I might have lost my temper and said some mean things, but he needed to hear it!" "I have every right to be angry with the way she hurt me!"

But God's Law does not teach us to mistreat others if they have mistreated us. God's Law teaches us to *"[love [our] enemies and pray for those who persecute [us]"* (Mat. 5:44). Jesus says that if you *"remember that your brother has something – anything – against you,"* go and *"be reconciled to your brother."* This thought is overwhelming. We have sinned against so many people in so many ways. How could we ever start to make amends with them all?

The place to start is with the person and situation that God has often brought to your mind—maybe someone you are thinking about right now. Very likely, your conscience has been troubled about how you treated them, but you don't know how to fix what was broken. You tell

yourself that maybe that person has forgotten what you said or doesn't think it was a big deal. Or you worry that by admitting your wrongs to them, they will not admit the wrongs they did which hurt you. Or you are not sure they will even hear you out, and you are nervous about how they will respond.

Apologizing to someone for a sin you have committed is a hard thing, one of the hardest things to do. It is hard because apologizing makes you vulnerable. It puts your sin out in the open. It puts you at the mercy of another. And you cannot control how the other will respond. You cannot make them forgive you or apologize for their own hurtful words and actions.

So why would you ever want to go through with it? Why not just ignore the conflict in your conscience, try to forget what you have done, bury it deep? Because then you have harmed not only your neighbor, but you do tremendous harm to yourself, including spiritual harm. Jesus indicates the damage that comes if you refuse to be reconciled. He says that if you fail to "*[c]ome to terms quickly with your accuser,*" you will be judged and "*put in prison.*" And He adds that "*you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*"

Insisting on our own righteousness even when we have done wrong, and ignoring the harm we have done to another, is a recipe for losing our faith. And that leads to the eternal prison of hell. We cannot trust our own righteousness *and* Jesus' righteousness. We cannot justify our own words and actions *and* believe we are justified by grace. The righteousness that counts before God cannot come from ourselves. It has to come from outside of us.

Just before today's reading, Jesus told the crowd that He had not come "*to abolish the Law or the Prophets,*" but "*to fulfill them*" (Mat. 5:17). He did not come to do away with the Law or to soften its impact. He sharpened its point, so that none could think on the basis of God's Law that they are right with God. We feel the sharp point of the Law today. Our hearts are pierced as we think about how we have let selfishness and pride get in the way of love for our neighbors.

Our sin and guilt are why the Son of God came down from heaven and was made man in Mary's womb. He came to fulfill all righteousness for us, to keep the holy Law of God to the smallest detail. His righteousness far exceeded the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. He never did an unkind deed, spoke an unloving word, or had a sinful thought toward any of the people around Him, not even those who wanted to destroy Him.

He went to the cross to pay for all their sins and yours and mine. He accepted the curse of the Law for us, even though He had not done anything to deserve it. He willingly took our punishment, so that we would be reconciled to God the Father. St. Paul writes that "*in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.... For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*" (2Co. 5:19,21).

We are at peace with God because Jesus fulfilled the Law for us and shed His holy blood on the cross to redeem us. Jesus was the ultimate Peacemaker. Who else could have brought together the sinful human race and the perfect God? Now Jesus wants us to be the same kind of peacemakers in our communities, workplaces, and in our homes. He doesn't ask us to make

peace by our own skills of compromise and negotiation. He expects us to extend the peace to others that He shares with us.

You may not see how you can reconcile with someone who has caused you deep pain. But Jesus can do it; it is not impossible for Him. He reconciled you with God, even though you had broken His Law time and time again. And He can reconcile you with a brother or sister in Christ, a sinner just like you.

When He pours His peace and forgiveness into you through His Word and Sacraments, it spills over into your relationships with others. Acknowledging your sins takes courage, and He will give you that courage. Humbling yourself to apologize takes strength, and He will give you that strength. God forgives all your sins, and as He works through your humble words of repentance, He can move the heart of your friend to forgive you too.

At the beginning of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "*Blessed Are the Peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God*" (Mat. 5:9). All of you are "*sons of God*" through faith in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26). That means you are God's peacemakers on this earth. As you extend His peace and seek reconciliation with others, you most certainly will be blessed, as Jesus promises.

Even if others do not return the peace to you that you extend to them, you can go forward with a clear conscience. You "*have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Rom. 5:1). His righteous life counts for you and all sinners and is the reason why you will enter the kingdom of heaven.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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