
Choose Healing
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
February 16, 2020
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Sirach 15:15-20 and Matthew 5:21-24, 29-30, 43-47

Well - today's texts are certainly interesting. The selection from Matthew was a small piece of what has come to be known as the "sermon on the mount". I have often been told that the sermon on the mount was supposed to be comforting - but I don't feel very comforted right now. How did you feel when you heard, "if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire". I'm guessing, not very comforted. And it is disturbing to imagine that thinking evil thoughts is just as bad as committing evil actions. How can that be? Besides, if it was that simple we'd all be living at the Maplehurst Correctional Complex.

Beyond that, the "cure" Jesus suggests is worse than the disease. Cut off my hand? Remove my eye? And for what? What would be the point of cutting off my hand - for example - if thinking bad thoughts condemns me anyway? If I cut off my hand to prevent me from killing someone, but I think about killing them - Jesus says that it is as if I have committed the murder anyway. Cutting off my hand would not fix the problem. The only way to avoid sin would be to cut out my brain! And even on my bad days, I find my brain something of an asset.

And then - as if that wasn't enough - Jesus treats us to what I consider to be the most provocative words in the entire Bible: "Love your enemies". That's crazy talk! I guess Jesus never met some of the morons that I have to put up with or he might have changed his tune. Sometimes, we have enemies for a reason, right? Perhaps Jesus was trying to irritate his audience so that they would leave before he had to feed them again!

The gospel text today reads more like a Monty Python script than a piece of holy scripture. What is Jesus getting at here? Well - ranting aside - I believe that Jesus is actually getting at something that is in fact very real indeed. Something that we all experience. Something very common even. I admit that the macabre images leave me unmoved, but there is something very basic and important in Jesus's message. And now I

have 12 minutes to prove that to you. I might fail.

Let's start with something simple. How often have you been driving along when - through no fault of your own of course - you became angry at another driver? Has that ever happened to you? But I'll bet you've also had the experience where you became angry at a complete stranger - and then through some strange series of events you actually got into conversation with the stranger. And when you got into conversation with the stranger you came to realize that both of you were actually human - and your anger disappeared.

A friend of mine shared a story with me. Years ago she found herself in a situation where she had to get her father to a Toronto hospital quickly. For reasons I can no longer remember, she drove him herself. Down the Don Valley Parkway. Mid week. During rush hour. She wasn't crazy. She knew traffic would be terrible. But her plan was to drive down the shoulder. OK - maybe she was crazy. In any case, she figured that other drivers would not object to her using the shoulder to allow her to bring her father to the hospital as quickly as possible. Well, she was both right and wrong on that point. Because my friend had the privilege of meeting quite a few people that day. On her drive, something like 8 people pulled in front of her to cut her off at different times. To bring her down to the speed of everyone else who was crawling down the parkway. And in all 8 cases, my friend got out of her car and went forward on foot - that's how slow the traffic was - to explain her situation to the other driver. And in all 8 cases, she was faced with a lot of anger and hostility. And in all 8 cases she patiently explained why she needed to get her father to the hospital. And in all 8 cases, after she shared her story, the anger and hostility that she faced completely disappeared. And in all 8 cases she was then allowed to proceed down the shoulder - at least until the next person further ahead decided to stop her and she repeated the whole process.

Not only did my friend - eventually - get to a hospital, but she connected with 8 strangers on the way. Because of the urgency to move on, I won't claim that any lasting friendships were built, but with all 8 people their anger was actually transformed into understanding, connection, and caring. Anger had been transformed into relationship at some level.

Stories like that lead me to realizing that Jesus does have a point. Perhaps Jesus is overstating his case - but at least he does have a case. Obviously hating a person is not the same as killing them, because hate may dissipate, but murder is permanent. However, if you are consistently angry with a person, you are killing the relationship you could have with them. And that's true even if the other person has no idea that you are angry with them. Anger kills relationships, and the potential for building relationships. Anger kills love. Anger kills excitement. Anger kills human capacity. See - Jesus was right - anger does kill!

Which is probably why Jesus spoke against anger. Sure, Jesus was angry himself sometimes. And anger - as an emotion - is something that we need to experience, name, and process when it enters our lives. But chronic anger destroys relationships, and the kingdom of God is all about relationships: renewed relationships, new relationships, reconciled relationships, healed relationships.

I think that we often mis-understand anger anyway, and for some of that we can blame the English language, which is often not very precise. For example, how many of us have ever heard - or said ourselves - "You make me angry"? How many of us believe that other people have the ability to make us angry? Well I hate to disappoint anyone, but science has proven that other people have a very limited ability to make us angry. And that limit is 90 seconds.

Sometimes we talk about "being angry". But there are at least 2 phase to our anger. The first phase - becoming angry - is something we generally cannot control. Anger rises up automatically within us when certain external events happen. That's how emotions work. That's the gift of being human. The next time someone cuts you off in traffic and you instantly become angry, consider your anger a "celebration of your own humanity." And in the second phase, we "remain angry", or to use a more modern term, we "hold anger".

Scientists have determined that the first phase, "becoming angry" is often completely beyond our control. But it is also short-lived, usually lasting less than 10 seconds, and never lasting more than 90 seconds. The second phase, "holding anger" is something that we are in control of. According to Alex Myles, "All [stimulated] emotions

last for less than 90 seconds ... If anything continues after that it is because we have added our own story and chosen to hold on to the emotion. Therefore, we are causing our emotions to escalate further and we are also ensuring they last longer. The more often we replay the memory, that is attached to a thought, or repeat one of our old painful stories, we remain caught in the cycle and it will get more and more difficult to disconnect.”¹

The Buddha had two interesting quotes about holding on to anger. One is, “Holding on to anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die” And, “Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.”

And yet, I know that many people are offended by the idea that anger has to be let go of. What about anger that is being held for “good reasons”. Surely it’s my duty to hold anger if other people do inappropriate things or things that are truly evil. Right? What am I expected to do when someone else makes me angry? Especially when I know that I am right and they are wrong? Well, I know it feels like that should make sense. However, it doesn’t seem to work that way. Do you remember what Nelson Mandela said after being released from prison after 27 years? Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years for very unjust reasons. When he was released, Mandela had any number of good reasons to feel anger or hatred against the people who put him in prison and against those who kept him in prison. On his release, he had this to say, “Yes, I was angry. And I was a little afraid. After all I’ve not been free in so long. But, when I felt that anger well up inside of me, I realized that if I hated them after I got outside that [prison] gate, then they would still have me. I wanted to be free so I let [my anger] go”. Becoming angry is rarely our own choice. But holding anger is always our own choice.

If we act out our anger on another person then of course they would be harmed. But if we choose to hold anger at all, we will definitely harm ourselves. Anger harms us. Choosing to hold anger harms us. Anger at another person harms someone, regardless of whether or not we act out our anger. Perhaps that is what Jesus was thinking when he said that holding anger is equivalent to killing someone. It just turns out that the person who is killed by our anger is actually ourselves, not the other person. The sermon on the mount

¹ <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2015/10/the-life-changing-90-second-secret/>

is ultimately about healing. Our healing. The sermon on the mount is not about how to fix the world, it is about how to fix ourselves. And sustained anger is something to fix.

In our reading from Sirach, God gives us fire and water - life and death - and we are invited to choose. And Sirach's words are that whichever option we choose is what God will provide. Imagine that. In other words, we should be careful what we ask for, because we just might get it!

What will we choose today? Fire or water? Death or life? Holding anger, or letting go of anger? I invite us to consider the image on the bulletin cover. The image shows a bright blue sky, but there is a barrier between us and that sky. However, there is a break in the barrier. In the image, the break is in the shape of a heart, because that break was created by love.

I invite each of us to take the bulletin home and spend some time with it this week. Reflect on any barriers to your own freedom that you have built up over your life. Imagine a hole in your barrier. Imagine what shape that hole could be. And then, break your own barrier and find new life. Find hope. Find healing.

Choose to let go of whatever is holding you back. Choose healing.

Amen.