

A young woman was taking an afternoon nap. After she woke up, she told her husband, "I just dreamed that you gave me a diamond necklace for Valentine's Day. What do you think it means?" "You'll know tonight." he said. That evening, the man came home with a small package and gave it to his wife. Delighted, she opened it--to find a book ... entitled, "The meaning of dreams". An example maybe of how even over Valentine's Day the men and the women may see things differently! The proximity to that day celebrated by chocaholics and flower lovers, is what prompted me to adopt the sermon title, Real Love.

The Gospel Reading today is not exactly Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll – but it comes pretty close. ANGER, ADULTERY, DIVORCE, and the TAKING OF OATHS – sounds like the focus for Judge Judy or Jerry Springer, yet it is Jesus who is the host of this show, the commentator on these matters, the observer of human behavior and the dispenser of the wisdom of God!

“Blessed are you”, was how this Sermon of Jesus began, “Blessed are you”, “On the right road are you”, when you trust God and go God’s way and obey God’s will and follow God’s purpose. Living the truly blessed life, being “on the right road” with God, with our neighbors, and with people everywhere is what the entire Sermon on the Mount is all about. No real surprise there, because being “on the right road” with God and our neighbors and with all people is what the entire life and ministry of Jesus is all about. Thus in these verses, we get to hear what it means to be blessed, what it means to be on the right road in relation to ANGER, and ADULTERY, and MARRIAGE/DIVORCE, and the TAKING OF OATHS. We get invited to step into the mind and the heart of Jesus in relation to these very human and sometimes very difficult, demanding, potentially embarrassing subjects. In the course of preparing for this sermon I realized there was way too much to say about the first two topics ANGER as MURDER and LUST as ADULTERY, that I would need to hold off our consideration of what Jesus teaches about Marriage/Divorce and oaths till next week.

What we are about to discover is how Jesus applies the Law of God to actual human behavior – our actual human behavior. Over today and next week, on six occasions, on six different topics, we will hear Jesus say, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times... But I say to you”

The first character that Jesus ushers before our collective imagination with these words is Mr. Angry, actually Mr. Terribly Angry, Mr. Really Really Angry, Mr. Acted on being Angry, Mr. Still Angry. Jesus turns our mind to Mr. Angry in a pretty extreme way, starting out as he did with mention of murder. As soon as Jesus starts talking about the prohibition against murder there is almost a collective sense of relief from those listening to the sermon – because few in that crowd, few in any crowd, save in a maximum security prison, are murderers ... or are they? For Jesus immediately presses the point that to be angry, to be insulting, to be demeaning, to be in an angry, broken, dislocated relationship with a sister or a brother is alike to murder. SHARP INTAKE of breath!

Despite or because of the dramatic, extreme manner in which Jesus gets us into this topic, and hopefully before we give voice to our “Now, just wait a Minute Jesus” thought, forming in our minds, we might allow these words and this wisdom of Jesus loose in our hearts and minds.

Yes, we may hear the bad news, the challenging news first, that to be angry is to be like a murderer but then the good news dawns on us. That Good News is this: Jesus realizes that people can and people do get angry, but there is a way to deal with this, the feeling alone does not mean we are stuck or lost.

Jesus realizes that even people who would wish to climb a mountain to hear Him preach get angry; that people regularly gather on a Sunday morning within the community of Jesus can and do get angry! And though Jesus knows this about us, this fact alone does not rule any of us out from following the way of Jesus. For all of us who have ever been angry, and all of us who may ever yet get angry, there is Good News here for us from Jesus. This Good news carries with it a responsibility because Jesus says that we must act quickly, and decisively to deal with our anger. Recognizing our anger, our first and immediate response must be to take steps, all the steps, to be reconciled. We are not to let our anger fester, we are not to ignore our anger, we are not to harbor anger and let it lead us further astray, we are not to wait for someone else to do something about the situation, we are to lay aside our gift at the altar, itself an obligation, and go and seek and offer whatever changes are needed to effect reconciliation, and then return to complete the gift that we had for God.

Harbored Anger is a problem for Jesus, harbored anger is a problem for all of us who would plan to follow Jesus, yet Jesus has time for any and all of us who ever get angry, so long as we are willing to walk the road to reconciliation, and by implication that we would live and plan not to get angry so often. Yes, there are situations in which injustice may lead us to express righteous anger, that is well and good, where we are angry at a system or an injustice, an affront against the weak or the oppressed or the marginalized. And no, this injunction is not a further burden on those who are abused or who face spousal or domestic or any other type of abuse. But for times when we are angry at another person, rather than lick our wounds or wait our chance for revenge or imagine that we know all the truth, the command of Jesus is clear.... Make friends quickly, end your anger, be reconciled, this is what Jesus calls us to do!

The reaction to all the implications of having to face up to and deal with our anger are still rippling throughout the crowd when Jesus continues by ushering onto the stage his second character by making one of the most astounding statements that has troubled lots of people ever since Jesus said it: "You have heard that it was said, 'you shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

These words have often been misunderstood and misrepresented to mean that any man, who has ever looked at a woman and has noticed in himself a sexual response, has committed adultery in his heart/mind. But this is not what the text says. When we look at the detail of the original Greek in these verses it does not mean: looking with a result that one has sexual feelings, but looking with a view to lusting after her, looking with a desire to commit adultery with her. The issue is not having sexual feelings, but what one does with them. As with anger, if you have them and harbor them towards a married woman, and dwell upon them, and let them come to affect your thinking and acting, towards her or your own wife, then you are in effect an adulterer in your mind. Jesus calls to men to get their minds sorted out.

What we hear Jesus say here about men and their sexuality has implications for both men and women. If we misunderstand the text as saying that finding women sexually attractive is sin, as some throughout history have done and some do still even today, then women would be a continued problem for men and it would be best if they were controlled and covered up, stopping them from causing men to sin. But this is not Jesus' attitude and response, what Jesus says makes men responsible for what they do with their sexuality, not women. Elsewhere in the Gospels we see that Jesus was apparently quite comfortable having both men and women together as his disciples, leading to complaints and

allegations from His opponents. As we know when a woman wished to anoint his feet or his head, some around Jesus saw this as a dangerous liaison and urged Him to send the woman away. But Jesus refused to dismiss the woman, because to Him she was neither a threat nor one to be exploited. It is this call to take responsibility for one's sexuality, analogous to the call to take responsibility for your anger that prompted the dramatic use of hyperbole, in the shock tactics advising people to sever their right hand or pluck out their right eye so as not to act in a lustful, unloving way.

Wow. Jesus knows about such stuff, stuff like lust and hot looks and impure thoughts and unfaithful longings. Once again we may hear the bad news first, that we have been rumbled, but then again the fact of who it is who is bringing up this topic must surely mean that while we have a need to face our demons there has to be hope and Good News to follow. Jesus must know, given the behavior of even some of His own ancestors that it can be quite a challenge for us frail, human beings not to commit adultery, especially for us good looking, powerful, wealthy guys who live in even the palaces of Jerusalem so what is the deal Jesus, why will you burden us with even more guilt about our roving eyes, equating our lustful looks with our breaking the Ten Commandments? Once again Jesus takes an already difficult Law, difficult because otherwise why would it have appeared in the Law of God if it wasn't much needed, and Jesus ratchets up the pressure by turning it into an even tougher demand.

Some interpreters of this passage have contended that Jesus wasn't really serious in telling us that we ought to be reconciled with our enemies before we offer our gift on the altar, or that we also ought never to be guilty of dirty thoughts in our minds. These commentators would advise us that Jesus took this approach, knowing that no one could ever do any of this, to reveal once and for all that we are miserable, weak sinners, denying us any sense of self-righteousness and so drive us into the hands of a loving and compassionate God.

Me, I think there is more going on here, it seems to me that Jesus is completely unimpressed by every gap that exists between our inner intentions, and our outward actions. Jesus asks for change, Jesus expects change and reformation inside and out!

Maybe most of us are pretty content because we avoid doing bad things, but for Jesus real love, is about seeing us match both our actions and our inward disposition to the way of Jesus. To remain angry at someone is to wish ill for that person, and even to wish that person were gone. And lust unchecked ends in destructive behavior, even to destroying lives.

The manner of Jesus' interpretation and re-application of the Law of God, "You have heard it said", but "I say to you...", implies that Jesus sees that there is a way to more fully faithful discipleship, inside and out, as we trust our lives to the Savior who in His life and death took upon Himself all that is wrong, and unclean, and demeaning and forgave us and at the same time called us to live and practice Real Love.

The evidence that this living of Real Love is possible and is our calling can be found in the lives of many and can be found in the lives even of people in this Sanctuary, who throughout time and in this time live faithfully not just by avoiding certain behaviors but by living a disciplined life, a disciplined life, in the mind and in the mood and in manner of their and our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Yes it is human, all too human, to feel rage and anger when we think we have been wronged. It is human, all too human to know lust for a person whom we find attractive. But, Jesus has a call to embrace not just our humanity in its brokenness but our humanity as it is redeemed and renewed and re-defined by the God whose image we have always borne, the image that is restored in all who are ready to set out to live as friends and followers of Jesus.

“Jesus faith” allows us to acknowledge our anger and our lust and free us from that anger and lust. The preacher of the Sermon on the Mount invites me, you, and all of us to see ourselves, no longer in thrall to passions and urges but as people freed to receive and express real love.

When we are ready to embrace God in such a way, when we are ready to discover real love, when we are ready to trust God's goodness and generosity towards us and towards all people, then we can stop writing ourselves off and we can stop writing other people off. Such an attitude runs counter to some very traditions that have become embedded in human society. Anger and violence are seen as acceptable so much so that we entertain ourselves and even our children with fantasies about killing. We are prone to see merit in dividing people into those we love and those we hate. Such practices can continue to seed racism, and seemingly simplify the complexity and messiness of needing to think, and to engage with the unfamiliar and less amenable and actual human situation.

There is even a religious form of this sort of attitude and behavior by which some are deemed as having not been chosen, of not having worth, of not counting. Sadly it has always been easier and continues to be easier to “eliminate” some sorts of people in this way rather than take up the challenge of respecting them, engaging them, seeking a right relationship with them – the way God would have us act, according to the gospel, according to this Sermon on the Mount, God's way as an expression of real love.

Thanks be to God that Jesus did not say, “Blessed are those who sweep things under the carpet!” Rather Jesus calls us to end the lies we tell ourselves and the lies we tell others about ourselves, and to deal with the real pain and conflict that always accompany harbored anger and to turn away from dwelling upon inappropriate thoughts and feelings which can only lead to pain. The response to these very human conditions is to embrace the real love that is God's gift and promise to us in Jesus Christ – held by the real love of God, it is this love that we live and share and offer and rely upon every day and in every way. Amen.