

**Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany + February 12, 2017**  
**Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI**  
**Matthew 5:21-37**

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On this day—today—in the United States of America, anger hangs heavily in the air. Anger was the *cantus firmus*, the recurrent underlying theme, of the 2016 presidential campaign. A Time Magazine headline over the summer read, “America’s anger is out of control.” I remember sitting with a group of you after church perhaps in September, and someone saying, “I’m so tired of this—I just want it to be over.”

But it’s not over. It’s only gotten worse. Several people I know, including my son—who has faithfully clicked “Like” for every Facebook post I’ve put up for the church—have sworn off Facebook for the time being because anger there is running rampant. There seem to be two kinds. One is the anger of those who are objecting to what they perceive as injustices—rights and privileges being denied for what appear to be political purposes, such as travel to the US from certain countries and affordable health care. This is the anger of the prim Tennessee schoolteacher who gained some measure of national fame a few days ago by standing up in a town hall meeting on the Affordable Care Act to say that “As a Christian, my whole philosophy in life is to pull up the unfortunate. The healthy people pull up the sick. But if we take those people, and we put them in high-risk insurance pools, they’re costlier and there’s less coverage... So we are in effect punishing our sickest people.”

The other kind of anger seeks to negate and destroy. This is the anger of those who, even though they won, remain obsessively focused on their defeated enemies. Compromise is out of the question. Instead they demand total capitulation, and when their enemies continue to resist, they become even more enraged.

Since today is Abraham Lincoln's birthday, it is useful to remember that our 16<sup>th</sup> president came into office facing similar forces of anger from those who were for and against slavery. Lincoln was not an overtly religious person, but his letters and speeches, and especially his Second Inaugural Address, show him to be deeply concerned with matters of faith. In a speech in early 1860 that put him on the map as a leading presidential candidate, Lincoln said that the only thing that would satisfy the pro-slavery Southerners is to "cease to call slavery wrong, and join them in calling it right" – total capitulation, in other words—by supporting all the runaway slave laws and the expansion of slavery. Lincoln goes on to say that those in his party, if they cannot end slavery where it exists, must fight through their votes to prevent its expansion. He concludes with a call to duty:

Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us, nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the Government nor of dungeons to ourselves. Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it.

It is this call to duty under a new and radical interpretation of how we are to live that Jesus is talking about in our Gospel reading today. The reading unfolds as a series of antitheses centered on basic teachings of Jewish law: "You have heard it said...." "But I say to you...." Jesus is not opposing these commandment—murder, adultery, divorce. But he is taking us to task for our shallow and inadequate understanding of them, and he is calling us, the inheritors of God's kingdom, to recognize that he is bringing about the fulfillment of these commandments in deeper and definitive way.

This new interpretation calls for us to take the law into ourselves and recognize that our inner attitude, not only our external action, is of the utmost importance. Our sense of duty, as Lincoln was describing it, emerges from this inner attitude.

Here is where anger comes in. Concerning the commandment not to murder, Jesus says, the law tells us that whoever murders is liable to judgment. What is the cause of murder? Anger. Anger that condemns and seeks only to destroy is a violation of God's law to choose life, as our beautiful first reading from Deuteronomy reminds us: "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him." And here's the shocker from Jesus: Even if we say something as seemingly trivial to another person as, "You fool!", we are already going down the wrong path. The exact quote from our reading is, "If you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."

Anger, and insults that come from it, are corrupting, and call forth God's judgment just as murder does. So what must we do? We must change our heart. A person's conduct originates in the heart, meaning the inner person. This is where the transforming power of God's kingdom is experienced.

Jesus gives us a vivid illustration. Worship cannot be offered to God by anyone whose heart is consumed with anger. So, Jesus says, as we are in the actual process of bringing our gifts to the altar—or we could say, as we are coming up to receive communion—if we suddenly remember that we are involved in some dispute with another person, we are to stop in our tracks, go and find that person who is accusing us, and be reconciled with them. Then we may come back and, with a clean heart, finish our trip to the altar. In other words, we must come to terms as quickly as possible with anyone who is accusing us. Otherwise, Jesus says, we might very well end up in prison.

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup>Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

So this is how we, the recipients of God's grace and inheritors of God's kingdom are to live: Not just "do not murder," but seek reconciliation as quickly as you can, at every opportunity. I can't help connecting this with where we, the people of Atonement, find ourselves at this point in time. I don't know the full story of what happened here over the last few years. But what I have heard was that anger seemed to be the driving force that led to the departure of a significant percentage of this congregation's active membership. What our Gospel text today is telling us is that these are matters of faith for the community as well as for individuals. We are the inheritors of God's kingdom not as individuals but as members of the larger body of Christ.

This is why we continue to need Christ's church on earth. When I hear the sad phrase "the church is in decline," this means not only that people have decided to make other choices with what to do on Sunday morning, but that the church as a community of faith has lost its center, perhaps even its reason for being.

I don't know how many of you are watching the new HBO series, "The Young Pope." In it, a brash young cardinal wins election to Pope and surprises everyone by mandating that the church go through a radical re-orientation of its priorities, stripping away all the excesses and returning to its theological core. The shocking way he goes about this this is not necessarily a model, but this series is getting at what Jesus is calling us to do here in Matthew 5: To let go of our cultural conditioning, that which would tell us, "No, I am NOT going to apologize to that person, they are wrong and that's the end of it!" and, instead, to leave your gift at the altar and RUN to seek reconciliation. This is the true discipleship that Jesus is telling us about in his Sermon on the Mount. It is what the church is called to be, and the future of the church depends on it. In a little while we will sing in the refrain of our closing hymn, "We are called to act with justice / We are called to love tenderly / We are called to serve one another / and walk humbly with God." The church needs us. Our country needs us. And God needs us. Amen.