

Sermon, Faith Mennonite Church
February 16, 2014
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Choose Reconciliation

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-26

Isn't this a beautiful passage from the book of Deuteronomy? "I set before you life and death...choose life, so that you and your descendants may live." Life is not dictated to you by fate—you have a choice! You can *choose* to be healthy, prosperous, productive—to have land to live on, a happy family, a rewarding career, a long and fulfilling life—to be a community that values living well. Here we have laid out for the people of God a crystal clear contractual relationship—these are the duties and responsibilities of the parties, these are the blessings that will accrue if the contract is upheld, the curses that will befall if it is broken. And here are the witnesses—heaven and earth themselves—who affirm the deal. Now isn't this a covenant with the living God that we can all get behind?

Show of hands—who in this room today votes for life? [And what's the other option, death?—who votes for death?] I think we've got it—we've grasped the lesson for today! So I guess that just about wraps it up...

Except, you know, there's one thing about this passage that really bugs me. Here are the Israelites gathered at the foot of Mt. Nebo, looking out over the Jordan Valley to the west, Moses intoning this wonderful, life-giving speech. But when you turn the page—just a few short chapters later in the bible—you get to Joshua chapter 10. "Joshua took Makkedah on that day, and struck it and its king with the edge of the sword; he utterly destroyed every person in it; he left no one remaining..." And then Libnah, and Lachish, and another city, and another, and then Hebron. Again and again, with cyclical ferocity they kill *everything that breathes*. And what's more, in chapter 11, we find the claim that this was really the Lord's doing, to harden the hearts of the people in the land, so that they might, as it says, "receive no mercy, but be exterminated."

How is it, in the space of 15 chapters, that you can go from affirming life, affirming a God of life, to the carrying out of mass genocide, led by a monstrous God of ruthless punishment and arbitrary death? What's that *about*? What *happened*?

We know that later on in the story the prophets are going to come on the scene and really push back against injustice, and ultimately point towards a Suffering Servant who brings good news of peace. Our covenant passage in Deuteronomy has the right message—it definitely has the core, the kernel, of a life-giving ethic. But that message, we Christians and Jews need to confess, is unfortunately wedded to a particular picturing of the nature of God that does not stand the test of time. God is imaged in this passage as a divine commander and punisher. Our role—the role of the people—is to either obey, or be killed. Well, with a view of God like that, it's no wonder, then, that 15 chapters and a few months later we ourselves begin acting out of and imitating that specter of a monster God that we've set up. All that other stuff in the agreement—about upholding life? Oh, yeah, well, all of that is "negotiable," that's "contextual," depending upon whose life, and whose land, we're really talking about. Right?

If we're going to be a people of peace, a people that thinks that we have something to say about nonviolence and peacebuilding, a people working for just inter-personal relationships and justice in the world, then look, people, we've got to be *especially* careful about the images of God that we're throwing around. Some of them might not serve us well. Some of them might undermine the very things we're trying to do. Some of them, as the arc of scripture attests, might very well be downright dangerous for the long-term health of our human community and our planet.

It's fascinating that the lectionary reading for today from the gospels is this passage from Matthew 5, in the Sermon on the Mount. Here again we have a covenantal form of relationship—an agreement not to murder, not to kill—to choose life. There's also a very interesting dynamic about punishment, here. If you just read this passage with a flat-footed image of divine command and human obedience in the back of your mind, then the message would appear to be “do not get angry, do not criticize, do not challenge, be Minnesota nice all the time.” End of sermon. Well friends, I do not for one minute believe that that is a faithful way to read this passage. And I'll tell you why.

Social ethicist Glen Stassen, whose book *Living the Sermon on the Mount* some of us read in an adult education class last year, points out that these “You have heard it was said...but I say to you” passages in the Sermon on the Mount—there are six of them—actually display a three-part structure, a triad, that is key to their original meaning.

Verse 21 is the first part of the triad here—a statement of traditional teaching. “You have heard it was said, do not murder”—a direct quotation from the Ten Commandments. Jesus the rabbi, the teacher of the law, is going to give you an interpretation of how to constructively apply this teaching in everyday life. So far, so good.

The second part, verse 22, consists not of new commands of Jesus, but rather descriptions of the conventional way things are—a diagnosis of how we typically get caught up in vicious cycles of domination and violence in everyday life. Frustration, anger, naming, ranting—all things that can very easily get you into a tit-for-tat escalation—you all know what I mean! Not only do you get tangled up with your spouse or your neighbor, but if left to its own devices it will wind up in the local courts or even go all the way up to the Sanhedrin. If you interpret this section to consist of commands of Jesus that you obey or disobey, with a mechanism of divine command and punishment behind them, then yes, it sounds exactly as if Jesus is condemning me to hell if I get angry and say certain words. Right, *right*?

No, that can't be right. The gospels show Jesus himself getting quite emotional, and on numerous occasions he gets angry and even has some choice words for people. When Jesus suggests that saying “you fool” will make you liable to the fires of hell, the funny thing is that *he himself did this very thing*. In Matthew 23:17 Jesus says to the religious leaders, “Woe to you...you blind fools!” So Matthew is picturing Jesus as disobeying his own “divine command”? I don't think so. In fact, what is almost assuredly happening here is that, far from condemning people to hell, Jesus is very likely poking fun at himself—perhaps even trying to get a laugh out of the disciples. After all, who out of this whole motley crew was most prone to spout off some provocative, prophetic wisecrack and get himself into fiery trouble with the authorities? Well, Jesus, that's who!

The end of our passage, in vv. 25-26, has more teaching that fits in with this theme. Who better than Jesus himself knows how quickly an accuser can hand you over to a judge, and then to a prison guard? I like that this part is included (Glen Stassen leaves it out of his book—probably doesn't fit with his theory!). It shows us that Jesus' disciples, Matthew's audience, knew what it was like to be a poor person in Galilee, to be perpetually in debt to a wealthy patron, to live in continual fear of being dragged into debtors prison until friends or family members could pay off every last penny and bail you out. If you read Jesus as saying, “Shape up, or God's gonna punish you—God's gonna make you pay!” you're completely missing the point. What this really is is a cry for hope and deliverance for those facing tough economic times, for those facing home foreclosure, for those facing indebtedness due to a healthcare crisis, for anyone who has gotten sucked in to the vicious cycle of retribution, violence, the justice system, bankruptcy, domination, and death, and can't find a way out. Jesus, when he speaks like this, is giving us all a realistic diagnosis about where we are right now. Just like the doctor who

says, “You know, it’s good this issue has come up, because now it can serve as a reminder for us to address the problem before it gets worse.”

So, okay, fine, Jesus. But, this is all so very depressing. What *is* your message of hope? What’s the way out? What are we supposed to do? In this passage, as in the other triads throughout the Sermon, Stassen argues that we always find a third section of text. This part features specific action verbs (very clearly defined in the original Greek) that point towards constructive *initiatives* that are to serve as markers of this new, discipling community of Jesus. It begins in verse 23 and goes through the first half of 25. We might paraphrase it something like this: You want to go to church on Sunday morning and be all pious? Try to get that *perfect* experience of God’s presence? And, oh, by the way, put lots of money in the offering plate? You know what Jesus says to all that? **Leave!** Yes, that’s right. Leave all that stuff there, all that baggage, and get out of there. Then, **go**, seek out your brother or sister, seek out the face of your accuser—your “enemy.” Then, **come to terms** with them, **be reconciled** with them before things get completely out of hand in the domination system. And finally, **come** and **offer** your gifts, now unburdened from the cycle of retribution, at the altar.

A healthy process of Sermon on the Mount reconciliation, we might say, ideally involves these four moments. Let’s translate them a little more clearly into our contemporary English. First, there is the moment of **separation** from an unhealthy situation, so that one can be physically and emotionally safe and secure, and gain a perspective on what has happened. Second, when the time is right, there may be an opportunity for **truth-telling**, for working with the trauma and injury through the construction of personal narratives of healing, and listening to those of others. Third, there may be possibilities for expressions of **apology and forgiveness**, in the context of a community which is capable of hearing and supporting such moves. And fourth, the moment of **reparation**, of the exchange of resources to repair the injury that has occurred and to offer concrete gestures toward community renewal that are capable of being sustained over time.

This is Jesus’ way of reconciliation. These are not hard sayings, impossible ideals, reserved for spiritual heroes in heavenly places. No. These are everyday practices, for each of you to put into play, at whatever level of interpersonal, familial, or societal conflict you find yourself. It’s not about not being angry or just being nice—it’s a *process* of figuring out how to live together and sustain the ecology that supports us.

And the key—the key that unlocks the life-giving and reconciling potential of these texts, and without which all this well-meaning peacemaking may come to naught, *is a choice*. A choice to make the claim that our God is not going to be a God of vengeance, punishment, and violent retribution. Ever. Period. Our God is a God of tough and gracious Love. A God of Reconciliation. And with that sacred image of Reconciliation at the forefront of our minds, we are freed to appropriate anew both the covenant of Deuteronomy and the covenant of the Sermon on the Mount in a way that cuts through the crap, and is both life-giving and withstands the test of time. And because our God of Reconciliation reconciles with us through the ministry of Jesus and through the resurrected Spirit of the living Christ, we as followers of Jesus have now been ordained as ambassadors of what Paul calls the ministry of reconciliation. We are now all—equally—empowered into that dangerous and beautiful ministry for the transformation of our earth and of every living thing on the face of it that breathes. That’s the promise. So friends, let us, this day, choose Love, choose Reconciliation, so that we and our descendants may live. Amen.