

The 6th Sunday after Epiphany: Holy Trinity Church: February 12, 2017

Matthew 5: 21-37: *We Cannot Forget, But We Can Forgive.*

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

When I was in the 6th grade at St. Ann's School in Cranston, I experienced the most embarrassing moment of my life. I still wince when I think about it. At recess a classmate named Gary removed my necktie that I left on my desk and undid the Windsor knot my father had tied. In the school yard he threw the tie at me laughing. I was in a panic because I did not know how to tie a Windsor knot and I knew Sr. Helena St. James would call me out on it and punish me for not having my necktie on. For the rest of the recess period, I frantically tried to tie it. Somehow, I flipped the tie over on itself and slipped it through the loop successfully tying the knot. I returned to class seething with anger. So, I decided it would be a good idea to send a little message to Gary via air mail. As Sr. Helena St. James wrote on the blackboard, I scribbled a message on a piece of paper, folded it into a type of glider, and then tossed it

in Gary's direction. My aeronautical masterpiece must have been a bit flawed in its' design because when I threw, it banked hard left and landed on Sister's desk just as she turned away from the blackboard to face the class. Then, with horror I remembered that I had signed the note. She retrieved my paper airplane and read it out loud to the class. After all these years the memory of what I wrote is still clear: "Hey fool, you are a jerk and a butt head, signed Johnny."

Now Sr. Helena St. James was a daughter of the Sisters of Notre Dame. The Sisters belonged to a very strict French order of nuns who were not to be trifled with especially by 12 year old pilots in their classrooms. Sister took her well-worn Bible from her desk. She turned quickly to Matthew, chapter 5, and read verse 22: *"But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."* I felt lower than a whale's belly. She launched into a fire and brimstone sermon that would have made even the vilest sinner repent. She capped it off by saying, "And you, John Higginbotham, should be particularly ashamed of yourself for writing such words since your uncle, after whom you are named, is a priest." That one hurt me a whole lot more than the ruler over the palms of my hands and the crying angel pinned to my white shirt awaiting Mom and

Dad's signature when I came home. So, over 50 years later and still wincing with embarrassment, I could not attempt to speak about the Sermon on the Mount without devoting this sermon to Jesus' words about anger. I dedicate this sermon to Sr. Helena St. James. God bless her soul. She was truly a saint.

All of us, at some time or another, hold grudges, experience anger, resentment, hostility and rage. For some of us anger is a big issue in our lives. It causes us to lash out at our spouses, children and friends. We unleash it on others on the road or in the workplace. We make ourselves and those around us miserable. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus confronts the subject of anger head on. So, why would Jesus make these extreme comments about an emotion as universal as anger?

My sisters and brothers in Christ, have you ever noticed that anger can cause us to do some very dumb things? Anger can also cause us to do terrible things. I read a story in the newspaper about man in the Philadelphia area who killed a driver who cut in front of him on the highway. The murderer explained that traffic had slowed as it was funneled into a single lane. He claimed that he waited in line for more than 15 minutes until he could begin to enter into the flow of traffic. Just as he was about to do so, another car passed him on the shoulder of the highway and cut in front of his car. As though that

were not enough, the driver laughed and gave him what we call in these parts, “the Rhode Island salute.” It was too much for him to handle. When traffic stopped again, he took a gun from his glove compartment, got out of his car, walked up to the side of the car of the man who had taunted him and shot him to death. The injustice of what had happened was bad enough, but being laughed at, taunted and given an obscene gesture was more humiliation than he could tolerate.

In our Gospel reading from Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is literally teaching us a new way to live. Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not kill, and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." Notice, first of all, that Jesus seeks to deal not with the outer act of anger, but with the inner emotion. Everyone gets angry and anger is a normal emotion. When we are upset with someone, the best thing to do is confront that person and say, "What you did has made me angry." That is the ideal. That is often very difficult to do. We hold our angry feelings inside. We hold these angry feelings close and we massage and nurse those feelings of bitterness and resentment. Bitterness breeds bitterness, hatred breeds even more hatred. Like a terrible beast within us grudges are born and such feelings of resentment, if left to go unresolved, can eat at our

hearts and souls for years, even lifetimes. Allowing feelings of bitterness and hatred to fester in our lives will eventually destroy us. Jesus wants us to conquer not only the outer act, but also the inner emotion. We also need to note that unresolved anger is a spiritual issue. There is a sense of urgency in Jesus' words. When relationships are strained, whether it's our fault or not, we are to go at once and try our best to reconcile. The sooner we are able to resolve our differences with other people, the better chance there is for reconciliation. The longer we wait the harder reconciliation becomes.

We were created for relationship. Broken relationships tear at the very reason behind our existence. The relationships we have with each other are that important. Our relationships with each other mirror our relationship with God. How can we expect God to forgive us when we hold grudges and are unwilling to reconcile with someone who has wronged us in some way? Jesus says to us, *"Come to terms quickly with your accuser."* Many people today struggle with forgiveness, and yet we cannot become the people Jesus intends us to become until we are able to seek reconciliation and then forgive.

My brothers and sisters, the goal is for us to love other people in the same way that God loves us. I believe children are certainly much more forgiving than adults. I think somewhere in the process of growing up we seem to have become experts at holding grudges, cradling fragile egos and unforgiving

natures.

My brothers and sisters, there is something beautiful about the mending of a relationship once broken. It happens from time to time. Brothers will vow eternal enmity. Sisters will stop speaking to one another for many years. Then something happens and that which was broken is restored. Perhaps it is beautiful because it reminds us of our relationship with God. Once that was broken, but because of God's great love for us, God took the initiative and reached across the great divide to bring us back. And that is what God wants and calls each of us to do.

I read an unforgettable story in Reader's Digest. On their first day of college back in 1968, Marsha Lockwood and Michael Cramer met. They were both freshmen at the University of Massachusetts. They liked each other right away. They learned that they came from neighboring towns, and they were only weeks apart in age. They had much in common, both played musical instruments in their high school marching bands. Their families had friends in common. As they began to date they discovered that they both had grandfathers who worked in the same office building. One was an accountant; the other was an insurance man. The two grandfathers were both in their seventies. When the two grandfathers were young boys they had gone to school together. They had been good friends all during their childhoods. In

the 1920s, though, they had a feud. It was over a business matter. Hyman Brodsky and Louis Cramer were furious with each other. They stopped speaking to each other entirely. They did not speak a word for over fifty years. When they would be in the elevator with other business people, they would talk to the others, but never to each other. They would not even look at each other. If they happened to find themselves with just the two of them in the elevator, the two boyhood friends would ride upstairs in total silence; fifty years of this. Meanwhile, the romance of Marsha and Michael was growing more and more serious. In 1974 they became engaged. As Hyman Brodsky and Louis Cramer were riding upstairs in the elevator, one of them remarked casually, "Well, it looks like the kids are going to get married." The other one said, "Yes, it looks that way." The silence of fifty years had been broken. A month before the wedding the two grandfathers were invited to an engagement party. It was the first time they had been at a social occasion together in over fifty years. Marsha recalls, "They were sitting next to each other all through the party. They were talking about their days in school back when they were boys. It was as if no time had passed at all." Their friendship seemed to grow immediately. Both had forgotten what that original argument had been about. It was a business argument, but neither one of them remembered the details. Marsha and Michael were married; Hy and Louie

were reconciled, forgiven and restored to being the best of friends. Marsha and Michael kept thinking that it was their meeting, falling in love and their marriage that changed the lives of their grandfathers, Hy and Louie.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, sometimes it happens that way with a fairy tale ending. Usually, though, reconciliation is very hard work. Reconciliation cost Jesus his life. Here is one of the most difficult challenges in our lives. If you remember nothing else from this sermon, please remember this:

Forgiveness does not mean we forget. We cannot forget, but we can seek to reconcile and to be reconciled. We cannot forget, but we can seek to forgive and we can seek out forgiveness. We cannot forget, but we can seek to restore a relationship and we can be restored in relationship. We cannot forget, but we can forgive those who have done us wrong, and we can seek the forgiveness of those whom we have wronged. Here is the most difficult part; someone has to take that first step. Remember, God took that first step in forgiveness with all of humanity when God gave us Jesus. With Jesus, isn't it time for us to take that first step as well? AMEN.