

- Deuteronomy 30:15-20
- or Sirach 15:15-20
- 1 Corinthians 3:1-9
- Matthew 5:21-37
- Psalm 119:1-8

On Monday morning, this past Monday, I got really mad at somebody. I mean, like super mad. I was really mad. I was like, I'm walking out of the room mad. I am so done with this person. Angry, furious, red in the face mad. I'm not making this up. I was mad and I went back and I took some time and I could feel the adrenaline. I can feel the adrenaline right now. I can feel the adrenaline was pumping in me and I'm like, argh! And I was so upset at this person and I was like, this is so wrong. I was wronged. I was injured. I did nothing wrong. This person did something wrong and now I am so mad. Why do they keep doing this to me? I deserve better. I don't deserve to be treated like this. I'm disrespected. This is crazy. I won't have it anymore. I am done. Talk to the hand. The face ain't listening.

Now, I'm a fair and generous person. So I thought, well, maybe I have some part in this. So I went to God and I said, God, was I wrong? Was she wrong? And God and I spoke about it and we talked it over and we came to the conclusion she was dead wrong. She was so wrong to do that. And so I thought, well, that's it. I am done. I've had it, I'm not going to do this anymore. And I thought of myself as a wonderful Verdun tree that has many healthy branches with lush green leaves that represent all of my perfect, wonderful relationships that I am able to keep because I'm such a great person. And then there was this gnarly old dead branch and that was her and I was done. And I'm cutting her off.

And I felt so good and I connected with God, and then I could feel the nudge of the Holy Spirit saying to me, now, go ahead. Do what you need to do next. So that was Monday afternoon. So I did what I had to do next. I had to get ready for this sermon. So I opened up the scriptures and here's what I read:

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, you shall not murder and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that if you're 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.”

And I got gut punched by God. I find the Bible sometimes highly annoying.

Our gospel reading is part of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus sits down on a mountain and looks at all of His disciples and the crowd that has gathered, and He tells them who they are and how they should be and how they should behave. Now, how many of you have read the Sermon on the Mount from cover to cover, which would be Matthew Chapters 5-7, and I'm asking you for real reason because in this church, the Holy Spirit is doing something very interesting.

We are having adults come to us who are getting baptized. We have adults coming here asking, what do I need to do to be a Christian? And they're asking legitimate questions like, how am I supposed to act when this happens and what am I supposed to do and what changes because I am a Christian? And they're talking to the clergy and there's a bunch of books that we could offer them, right?

I mean, there's *Being Christian* by Rowan Williams, there's *Baptized, We Live* by Daniel Erlander. There's *Jesus was an Episcopalian: And You Can be One Too* by Chris Yaw. And I mean, they're good books, but I never really found one that I truly loved. But apparently in the early years of Christianity, the adults who were preparing for baptism would study the Sermon on the Mount and figure out from that what it meant to be a Christian. So it was the early catechism of the church, a manual on how to live. I mean, I'm just trying to think like if some of the people who are coming into our church, you know, what would happen if I gave them the Sermon on the Mount and said, here, read this. This is how you be a Christian. And they get to the verse that says, if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away, because it's way better to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into Hell.

I remember sitting in a class in seminary with the great Richard Hays. He is a New Testament scholar. He's a Methodist. And we were talking about the Sermon on the Mount in the greater context of the Gospel of Matthew, because the Gospel of Matthew has a tendency to hold Christians accountable to a higher standard.

And so Dr. Hays said that the church has had many ways to deal with this gospel, but one of the most dangerous ways, in his opinion, was what he called the "Lutheran option." Now the Lutheran option is to read passages like this that holds you to what seems like an impossible standard, to throw your hands up in the air and say, I'm a sinner. I can't do this. And then take a beeline and run straight to the foot of the Cross, prostrate yourself there and say, Christ, you have saved me. I am saved by grace alone, not by the works of the law, and get up and realize you're free in Christ and now you don't have to worry about that stupid law. You have been saved by Christ.

That's the Lutheran option. Now I'm a Lutheran. And I love the Lutheran option. I love it because seriously, how are we supposed to be able to do all this? Anger, infidelity, divorce, having our words say exactly what we mean. Are you kidding me? So I believed actually for a fairly long time of my Christian life, that whenever we come to passages like this, it just is meant to simply push you to see very clearly that you need a Savior. And because of that, you can accept and love Jesus Christ who has come into the world to save us sinners. And that is the value of passages like this. Other than that, it can be ignored.

Now, what's interesting though is I'm actually not sure that Luther himself intended for Lutherans or any other kind of Christian to just ignore the Sermon on the Mount or any other hard passages in the Bible. Now, I was baptized as an adult, and I remember coming to the church and saying, what is required from me to be a Christian? What am I supposed to do? What's supposed to change for me? How am I supposed to be so I can call myself a Christian?

And my pastor, who was Lutheran, handed me *Luther's Small Catechism*. This has been around for centuries and Luther made it, and it doesn't have the Sermon on the Mount but it has the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. And Luther believed that not just those who are preparing for baptism, but those already baptized should be catechized every single year and remind themselves what it means to be a Christian.

And the setup of the Small Catechism is actually fairly simple. He lists a line from the creed or the prayer or the Ten Commandments. He'll list one of the Commandments and he'll ask a simple question. What does it mean? And he answers simply. So I particularly remember when I was studying to become a Christian, looking at the Ten Commandments and when we got to you shall not murder, I thought, oh, I know exactly what that means. It's kind of obvious. How hard can this be?

But this is what Luther said. What does it mean? We should fear and love God so that we would not hurt nor harm our neighbor in his body, but help him and befriend him in every bodily need. And I realized that this wasn't about prohibiting me from doing something. It was making me proactive to do something greater. And why would I do that? Because I love and I fear God.

And when I say fear, I mean that kind of fear, hypothetically, that a boy who's maybe 15 years old, a teenage kid who leaves the house one morning on a school day when it's 25 degrees out, and leaves his coat on the living room floor so his mama sees it. So that when he comes back from school, his mama picks up that coat, puts it in his face, looks him in the eye. He is six feet, but looks him in the eye and says, don't you ever forget your coat, child. And that child is helpfully afraid. Why did mama do that? Because she knows what's best for him. She knows what will make him thrive. She knows what is good and she loves him.

So I think what's going on with Jesus here in this Sermon on the Mount is not that he's ratcheting up all of these laws so that we can feel a greater burden and feel like we're so unworthy. It's that Jesus actually knows what's best for us. Jesus knows what is going to give us life and what is going to suck the life out of us so that we are in our fires of Hell of our own creation.

I mean, what do you think? What happens when you read these expositions Jesus offers to help us deal with parts of living? Or do you feel guilty, divorced, committed infidelity, got angry, didn't say what you mean? Are you ashamed? Are you embarrassed? Do you just want to run out? Or do you realize that God is not trying to chide us? God is not trying to shame us. God is simply saying, there is another way to be that will free us from the bondages of our sins.

The purpose of the law is not to provide boundaries for you. Bumper rails, so that you can just do everything else in between. The purpose of God's law is to show all of us how to have the abundance of life. And anger and lust and breaking vows and making vows that we don't intend to keep, they all lead us to places of suffering, of pain, and death. These words, they're hard. But they're hard not because we fall short. They're hard because they are right.

After I read that passage on Monday morning and – actually, it was Monday afternoon. I got mad on Monday morning. On Monday afternoon after I read the passage, I did a couple things. First, I outwardly groaned. I was like, you've got to be kidding me. And I was upset because I knew it was right. So I began to pray and I said, God, what am I supposed to do here? This person wronged me, what should I do? And God replied, don't cut her off. Don't go on a tirade. Go and speak to her, but without anger in your heart. And you're going to do it because I love you and I love her, and I want you both to be reconciled and I really don't want anything else from you until you do.

And that's what I did Monday, late afternoon, and the person noticed that something had changed inside of me. I guess I have a problem with anger, but I went there wanting reconciliation more than anything because that's what God wanted. And had I gone to this person with the desire to cut them down, I'm pretty sure there would have been no space for reconciliation.

Now, we're still working through our issues – it was just Monday. But we're working through our issues. How do you manage your anger? Do you act on it? Do you let it fester? Do you explode? Do you cut off people? Can we share with one another the ways that we manage our anger as disciples? Because God seems to care deeply about this and this is the power of the Sermon on the Mount, right? I can see why early Christians used it to learn their faith because there is something about the Word of God, even the hard words that can change our lives.

Now, one of our adults who is thinking of getting baptized came to me recently and asked me a bunch of the questions, what am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to believe? How am I supposed to behave? And I tried my best to answer them. And then she told me that she'd been doing some research on her own. Thank you, Google. And she had discovered a prayer by Queen Elizabeth I that was written somewhere in the 1500, it's called the Latin prayer. And she wrote it out on a piece of notebook paper and she folded up and she kept it in her purse and she would pull it out every day to read it.

And as I read it, I was like, oh my goodness. She already knows what it means to be a Christian. She already knows what it means to put your full trust in God. And believe that God will show you the way, even through the word. It's a beautiful artifact of faith and I got permission from her, and it is in your bulletin on the back page. I want to read some of it. It's long. I want to read some of it so you can see how today, right now someone is preparing to become a Christian like you and me, by relying on the Word to give her direction.

May thy word Lord, be a light to my eyes, a lamp to my feet, honey in my mouth, a song to my ears, a joy to my heart. May it be salvation for my soul, protection for my life. Hope in fear, delight in love, nourishment in food, rest in sleep, meditation while waking, peace in my conscience, prudence in my counsels, moderation in severity, equity and mercy, and impartiality in both.

With love for thee alone before all else may my heart be a flame that I may follow thee in thy law as my leader and hear thee in thy word as my teacher. Amen.

[End of Recording]