

Getting to the Heart of It

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Psalm 119:1-8; Matthew 5:21-26
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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What Jesus is up to in the Sermon on the Mount, with which Pastor Layne began us last week with the powerful reflection on being 'salt' and with which we are continuing this week with Jesus' words about dealing with anger; and what the Psalms are doing, including in the loooooong Psalm 119; what the Bible is doing *generally* is that they are all about creating an alternative community in the world, a community that is organized differently than the rest of the world, in order to offer the world a different, and more excellent, way to live.

The church, at its best, has always been an alternative community in the world. An alternative community, organized around different purposes, different priorities, different agendas – all of which flow from the fact that the church is gathered around, and organized around, a different God.

"I am the Lord your God, the One who brought you out of your slavery in the land of Egypt," we read at the beginning of the 10 Commandments in Exodus 20, "You shall have no other gods before me." Other people were organizing themselves around the purposes, priorities, and desires of Pharaoh, King of Egypt, because Pharaoh had positioned himself as their Ruler, their Sovereign, their Master and their Savior, the one who would keep them safe ... as long as they served him.

But the people of Israel became an alternative community organized, not around the brutalizing purposes and agendas of Pharaoh, but around the gracious purposes and the will of the Lord, the One who had set them free from their slavery. So, whereas Pharaoh commanded his servants to work and make bricks 7 days a week in order to build pyramids and other such buildings to glorify Pharaoh, the Lord, the God of Israel, commanded his people to rest one full day out of every seven, so that they could live lives of regular renewal, knowing that their ultimate value was not in how many bricks they could make for Pharaoh, but in the love they would show to God and to their neighbors. Pharaoh and the Lord fostered two very different kinds of communities.

The people of God, at our best, have always been an alternative community.

In New Testament times, there were people who organized their lives around following the purposes, priorities, and desires of Caesar. That was how you got ahead in the Roman Empire. It was how you kept yourself safe. Caesar referred to himself as

their Lord, their Savior, the Son of God, and he was swift to enforce those titles with various methods of punishment.

But the church became an alternative community, who organized themselves, not around following Caesar, but around following Jesus of Nazareth. The kingdom of Caesar was organized according to a strict socio-economic-political hierarchy, clearly delineating who was a friend and who was an enemy, who was in and who was out. The church, on the other hand, organized itself around Jesus, who lays out the upside-down kingdom of God in the Sermon on the Mount, where the values and the priorities of Pharaoh and Caesar and every dominating regime are turned upside down – whether we're talking about a dominating regime in geopolitics or in the school cafeteria. The poor are blessed, the weak are strong, the oppressed and shunned and beaten up have places of prominence, those who get made fun of are given seats of honor, the first are last, and the last are first.

Jesus came to create an alternative community, he came to lead us in a new way of life, and the people who follow Jesus have always been, at our best, an alternative community in the world.

What we can see in the section of the Sermon on the Mount that Cathy just read for us is that this new way of life that Jesus leads us in, *flows from the inside out*. It is not imposed from the outside, it is a life that flows from a reordered heart, a "clean heart, a new and right spirit," as Psalm 51 puts it, an undivided heart, a "whole heart" as Psalm 119 puts it in our first reading today. Wholehearted living gives you something very different than living with a divided heart.

The alternative community of the church is not simply an external phenomenon. The behaviors and practices of the church are not imposed upon the church from the outside by some external authority. Jesus is not after grudging conformity; he wants changed and transformed lives. He wants to reconfigure our hearts, so that our reconfigured lives will follow.

That's what Jesus is getting after in this section of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, where he names various externally observable behaviors – do not murder, not commit adultery, and so on – and he says, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not do these.'" We may think of these things as some of the basic guidelines for a functioning community: do not steal, do not murder, go to church, eat your vegetables, everything in moderation, get eight hours of sleep, go to the gym, say please and thank you. All good things. Things we teach our children to do.

But it is entirely possible to do all these things *without a changed and reordered heart*. It is possible to keep all the rules, to live a life of outer performance and to actually become rather self-righteous about that outer performance, to do all of those outer things while nursing a grudge on the inside towards someone who did you wrong that one time. It is possible to do all these outer things, and to view those who do

things differently with withering contempt and scorn. I know this is possible, because I've done it. There have been more times than I would like to admit, when I have congratulated myself on doing what is right, while sneering at people who did things differently. I've got a feeling I'm not the only one.

Jesus did not come to create a world of outer conformity to rules, but to inaugurate a kingdom of grace, mercy, and reconciled enemies. If you nurse your anger at someone, Jesus is saying, rather than dealing with your anger in a direct and honest and simple way; if you take to insulting your neighbor, putting them down and gossiping about them with others in order to build up your own social standing; if you call your neighbor by contemptuous terms like "You fool," which is actually the Greek word "moron," then you are poisoning your community in ways that may not be as literally destructive as murder, but in ways that are poisonous and are not of Jesus' kingdom.

It does not take a lot of imagination to see that our world is organized in profound ways around showing contempt for our enemies. Massive amounts of money are made around the world by entire industries of contempt. Our world is organized around dehumanizing our enemies, and then around feeling quite justified in dehumanizing those enemies, so that we may go to war with them and eliminate them.

Jesus is inviting us to practice an alternative way here. Jesus assumes that we will get angry, will have conflicts with people, will have enemies. He is *not* telling us to pretend that everything is just fine. He is telling us to handle our anger and our conflicts with maturity and with love, rather than riding our anger towards the land of contempt.

Jesus is gathering around himself an alternative community, one whose outer behaviors of justice and righteousness flow from reordered hearts, from undivided and whole hearts. And when we put Psalm 119 together with Matthew 5, what they teach us together is that this way of life, this alternative way of being in the world – organized around Jesus and his mercy towards sinners, his grace towards the undeserving, his justice for the poor and the oppressed, his love for enemies – this alternative way of being is not just a good way to live, it is the path to happiness. "Happy are those who walk in the way of the Lord," says Psalm 119. "Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart."

Is there some situation that is activating anger in your heart these days that you need to attend to? Is there a disagreement or conflict in our community or neighborhood that is calling for your faithful attention? In what ways does your heart need to be reordered, reconfigured by Jesus during these days? To God and to God alone, be all the glory. Amen.