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St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Year A, 6 Epiphany – Matthew 5:21-37
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Whoa. How about that gospel reading. *If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away...And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.* These are just some of the harsh words in our gospel reading today. It is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount that we have heard from the last two weeks. Jesus is turning his attention to some of the more contentious issues of his day. His words, particularly about divorce, sound especially threatening and unforgiving. While time prevents me from offering a thorough explanation of ancient Jewish laws about marriage, adultery and divorce, *please understand that this passage must be interpreted in light of the context in which it was written.* Too often, it has been taken out of context and used as grounds for shame, judgment, and condemnation toward those who have gone through the heartbreaking and often necessary experience of divorce.

With that being said, how do we read today's gospel? Jesus offers a series of statements beginning with *"You have heard it said..."* He is referring to the Jewish law that was ingrained in the hearts and minds of his audience. But then he offers a different take on each of these admonitions. *"But I say to you,"* he begins. He continues with a vision of the deep intention that is behind these laws. He is teaching his people that his presence ushers in a new era; he is calling them to go beyond the letter of the law and to reach for the spirit beneath each command. As he told them in the passage we heard last Sunday, he is encouraging them to exceed righteousness.

And so, with each of his "I say to you's," Jesus unpacks what that will look like in certain situations. And at the heart of each of them, he is acknowledging that the kind of relationships he calls us to are hard. Being brothers and sisters in Christ with one another is hard. True friendships are hard. Marriage is hard. Look at his first example. Most of us manage to avoid murdering the folks who make us angry. But that is not enough, Jesus says. Instead, we are called to mend the broken relationship – and not to come to church until we have! *"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift,"* he says.

In other words, it is not enough to seek God's forgiveness just by coming to church. That feels doable, right? Engaging in the difficult process of reconciliation is so much harder. Our tendency is to avoid confrontation. In fact, it is because Jesus knows how difficult this is that he resorts to such extreme language. Scholars agree that his warnings about prison and the fires of hell and his admonitions to tear out our eyes and cut off our hands are hyperbole. But he employs

this radical rhetoric to shock us into thinking beyond the letter of the law. It forces us to seek healing and wholeness.

Why is this kind of reconciliation so important? I think that Jesus understood the insidious nature of anger. While it may not lead most of us to kill, it can eat away at our souls. Unresolved conflict, particularly with people we love, can become toxic. It begins to affect other relationships and areas of our lives. It prohibits both us and them from living fully into the people we were created to be. Perhaps you, like me, have had experiences of this in your own life.

Furthermore, the gospel is clear that we are not meant to go at this business of life alone. God desires for us to live in relationship with one another, whether it is in families, friendships, partnerships and marriages, or our communities of faith. Each of these requires mutual support and compassion. The integrity of these relationships is threatened when its members are at odds. True reconciliation requires the hard work of looking within ourselves at our part in the conflict. It requires seeking and offering forgiveness.

This admonishment for reconciliation seems timely, doesn't it? As you may know, our Diocese gathered for its annual Council this weekend, and I want to share something from Bishop Hollerith's address. As he reflected on the past year, he said:

We suffered through one of the most contentious, disquieting, disheartening and destructive political processes in the last century. Regardless of one's political leanings, all of us were scarred by the election. It is evident that we are a country suffering from deep divisions. The nature and depth of our polarization can be seen in just about every major political issue. Many of us are wondering where we are headed as a nation.

As these divides unfold on a national scale, they also have trickled down and become deeply personal for many. How many people did you speak to before the holidays who were anxious about the dinner table conversations with extended family? Last week, I sat with a woman who wept because she feels so estranged from her parents after her decision to participate in the Women's March on Washington. There are constant accounts of the divisiveness unfolding on social media, as friends de-friend one another and twitter wars erupt. Meanwhile, there are the usual challenges of being a part of whatever relationships we are in – in our homes and families, our workplaces, our church – particularly when we disagree about the issues that are facing our country today.

In the midst of so much anger and brokenness on all sides, the church has an opportunity to model the exceeding righteousness that Jesus calls us to. Again, I'll quote Bishop Hollerith:

The Episcopal Church in Southern Virginia is well situated for raising issues in local communities and working for positive change. We're also in a perfect position to invite non-anxious conversation around very difficult matters. And God knows, such conversation is desperately needed these days. Call it what

you will, but I think we have a real opportunity to be a positive force for healing and change and to be part of how God, in Christ, "is reconciling the world to himself"(2 Corth.5:19).

Here in our St. Andrew's congregation, we come from different places politically, but we have continued live with love and respect for one another to in the midst of our differences. We are called to be a prophetic voice, but part of being prophetic is modeling how we treat one another when we do not agree. I have seen this happening the last few months, and it is a refreshing contrast to what is unfolding elsewhere. We must continue to create safe spaces for dialogue and debate, knowing that our unity first and foremost is lived out around that altar, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

There is no doubt about it: Jesus doesn't pull any punches in today's gospel. He is clear that reconciliation is hard work. But it is holy work. In this challenging time, may we be exceptional in modeling that to a world that so desperately needs it. Amen.