

Death by 1,000 Cuts

February 12, 2017

During the children's sermon, we discussed that phrase we've all heard, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." It's a way that adults try to get kids over the hurtful words they hear. It's an important lesson for us to learn . . . and it's not true.

We all know people who have been deeply scarred by the words of others. Sometimes it takes the form of bullying. Sometimes it's verbal abuse from someone we are close to. Other times it's the random comments of someone who may not even recognize that their barbed words intersect precisely with someone's deep wound.

In today's gospel, Jesus makes a ridiculous claim. He reminds us that we all know that if we murder we are subject to judgment. But then he says that if we are angry we are subject to judgment, too. In fact, he goes on to say if we call someone a fool, we are subject to the fire of hell. If we call someone a fool, we are subject to the fire of hell.

If we take this literally, 90 percent of those people who have made a comment online are subject to the fire of hell. What could Jesus possibly be talking about? Surely a Facebook comment is not on par with murder. No. One comment isn't. One utterance of, "You're a fool!" doesn't earn God's wrath.

But whoever says that just once? I have seen a trend in online articles in which authors of particularly controversial pieces will create a two-comment limit wherein people can share their views, but only to a point. In another example I heard of a man recently who said that he has a hard time asserting himself because he watched his father pick, and pick, and pick at his mother, and he vowed to never be like that.

The reality is that our harsh words rarely are uttered in isolation and are rarely an individual incident. Jesus knew this. He understood that our harsh words often reflect an interior disposition, a disposition of callousness, of superiority, of disdain, of hate, of disregard. One "You're a fool" may not scar, but hearing it regularly from a parent, or a spouse, or a teacher – it could be deadly.

It invokes that old Chinese practice of death by a thousand cuts. You don't deal the death blow right away. There are just slow, painful cuts, so you're aware death is coming. Instead of one swift death blow, insults and put downs kill slowly and methodically, bit by bit. In saying that not only murder is offensive but anger and harsh words are as well, Jesus is deepening and broadening the law.

The gospel that we read today is a continuation of Matthew 5, "The Sermon on the Mount," which we've been reading for the past several weeks. It starts out with the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . Blessed are those who mourn . . . Blessed are the peacemakers." Then it goes on to tell us that we are all to be God's salt and light in the world, that we are all to be God's animation, to be God's flavor, to be God's illumination in the world.

One of the interesting things about the gospel of Matthew is that the author does all sorts of things to try to show us that Jesus is the new Moses. We read of the five dreams that are early in

both of their lives. Both are forced to become refugees when the political forces in their homelands come to a head. So, when we get to the Sermon on the Mount, we're supposed to remember what happened when Moses climbed the mountain. What happened when Moses climbed the mountain? He was given the law – the 10 Commandments – God's gift to the Hebrew people which would help them to not just be individual believers, but also a community of followers.

So, too, when Jesus climbs this mount. His listeners are to understand that this sermon is not only the centerpiece of his teaching, but also a gift from God that will help us to live as a community of followers. Now Jesus takes what seems like a sharp left turn after the Beatitudes and salt and light. He takes a sharp left turn into these hard sayings equating harsh speech with murder and lust with adultery. But if we remember the purpose of the 10 Commandments with Moses – a gift to help us to be not just individual believers but a community of followers – then these teachings start to make sense. They remind us of that principle that runs through Jesus' teaching: We are to embrace the spirit of the law over the letter of the law. We shall not kill physically, but also not verbally or emotionally. We shall not commit adultery. We shall not bear false witness either in deed nor in word.

Years ago I had someone tell me, "I'm a good Christian. I never break the 10 Commandments." She told me this even though I knew her to be quite the gossip and she had an online relationship with someone who wasn't her husband. Today's gospel passage was written for her. We are to embrace the spirit of God's intentions for us, not just follow the legalism of the words.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is teaching us to be counter-cultural and counterintuitive. Society, even then, even 2000 years ago, said: "Blessed are the strong; blessed are the powerful. Find the narrowest sliver of the law that will allow you to get what you want, to do what you want." That's what society said. In teaching us to embrace the spirit of the law, Jesus was being radical, not in the raiding and looting sense of the word radical, but in its true meaning. The Latin base of the word radical is radix or root. When Jesus is urging his followers to be countercultural, he's being a radical in so much as he is calling us back to our root. God isn't honored just by us following the rules, when we memorize a set of codes and don't deviate from them, God is honored when we would build a life and a society in which relationships are honored, in which the things that God values – love and compassion, and healing, and hope – are the things that we value, too, both as individuals and collectively.

Friends, Jesus is calling us to be radicals, calling us to build households, and schools, and companies, and governments that are based not just on following the law, but on the spirit of what God values. If anger, and lust, and harsh speech create death by a thousand cuts, our call as followers of Jesus is to create life and society by a thousand blessings, through kind words and compassionate policies and acts of mercy and integrity. These dispositions are not easy. They're often unpopular. But, they are as radical as Jesus was radical. They are the roots of our God, and they are at the root of following Jesus. May it be so. Amen.

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