

Sunday, February 16, 2014  
Sixth Sunday After Epiphany  
Matthew 5:21-37  
Leaving Your Gift  
Elizabeth Mangham Lott

Elizabeth Meztista and I were best friends throughout elementary school. We were in the same class every year and were identified by our last names: “ME” for Meztista and “MAY” for Mangham. We both had the same blue sweatshirt with a green cartoon dinosaur on the front. We both had Coca-Cola Classic t-shirts. We were both on safety patrol and were both 5<sup>th</sup> grade assistants to a kindergarten class. Our backyards backed up to one another, so our dads built a gate to connect the two houses. We were always going back and forth through that gate. We performed dance recitals on my back porch and performed acrobatic feats on her swing-set. We even tried to start our own “Babysitters Club.” All of that changed in the sixth grade.

It was Christmas break, and we’d spent three or four nights in a row at each other’s houses. One night at mine, one night at hers, the next night back at mine. As an adult, I know that is too much time for 11 year olds to spend together. At the time, however, it seemed like a really fun Christmas break. It was the last day of this streak that everything fell apart. We were playing Monopoly on my living room floor, and Elizabeth was cheating. Actually, she just wasn’t offering information, and I failed to notice. It’s all in the Monopoly rule book. But I was 11, and we had been together for days on end. I didn’t care about the rule book. She had landed on a couple of my properties and not paid rent. Once I realized what had taken place, I tried to collect my money. She refused to pay. I felt my blood boil. I was losing the game because she wasn’t being completely honest!

I told her I thought it was time for her to go home. She refused. My anger grew. I told her that my dad would make her go home. She said he couldn’t. I stood up and told her she should leave right away. She sat firm in her place on the floor and wouldn’t budge. I started to walk past her but stopped. In a swift move of bravado I’ve never experienced before or since, I decided to kick her in the back of the head. I kicked her, then I ran. I ran for the stairs to go find my parents, but she was up and after me. My brothers found us and began screaming for my parents. Elizabeth was on my back and pulling my hair.

My father appeared, separated us, and took Elizabeth home. That was the end of our friendship. The gate between our yards has remained closed and locked for more than 25 years. I mailed her a letter when we graduated high school that said we’d let too

many years go by without speaking. We talked on the phone one time after she received the letter, but it was clear we had little in common. Over six years had passed since that holiday afternoon, and we were able to laugh about our 6th grade fight. We didn't go past that, though. We left for college, and I haven't spoken with her since.

Perhaps early adolescent fighting isn't exactly what Jesus was getting at when he instructed his followers to forgive others. But there are certainly times throughout life when we choose to kick one another in the head and run away. The gates between neighbors are fused shut—never to be revisited or reopened.

This morning we continue our study of the Sermon on the Mount, and we come to a passage known as the antitheses. “You have heard it said, but I say,” Jesus repeats six times as he magnifies the essence of the law over the letter of the law. This passage lays out scenarios in which we can live out God's love and live into God's goodness.

As I have studied today's text, I am consistently drawn to the first three verses about the work of reconciliation and its connection to our preparation for worship.

*“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 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. 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.”<sup>1</sup>*

Matthew's Gospel focuses consistently on Jesus' instructions to forgive. In the next chapter, Jesus will tell his followers, “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will God forgive your trespasses.”<sup>2</sup>

The Greek verbs we read in English as forgiveness can more accurately mean “to let go” or “to release.” This is not an obligatory forgiveness because I know my own hinges upon it; it is sincere and from the deepest part of our being. This “release” spills out of the forgiveness we have experienced and then offers a release of its own. What Jesus is

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:21-24

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:14-15

describing is the invitation to be part of who God is and what God is doing in the world.

To forgive is to become part of a mysterious, counter-cultural process of letting go of all the hurt and anger that our world tells us that we have every right to hold onto. To be forgiven leaves us desiring to break open the rusted locks of the gates that divide us and prevent us from living in community.

And that is why Jesus gives the first antithesis in the context of temple worship. It doesn't take long to figure out that one of Jesus' primary messages is that the stuff of worship, the essence of faith, the details of our belief system **MUST BE** lived out in ordinary life. If they are not, then we are, at best, hypocrites, or, at worst, liars deserving God's most severe punishment. For we have taken the Lord's name in vain when we enter this place and whisper from our lips, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," as we simultaneously roll our eyes at someone across the room. "She has some nerve showing up here, doesn't she?" "I can't believe he can hold his head up high in this place." Or we clean it up as only Southerners can do, "He's here again. Bless him."

Jesus knows that what he is asking is impossible. So before we start to feel too burdened by our imperfection, know that he's calling us to be our best selves and to do better with every day, but he knows we are fighting between the light and dark in each of us. Our acts of worship should be mindful and not casual—we bring our truest selves to worship, even if we know we are not yet able to forgive or to heal or to believe or to hope. But we keep showing up with an awareness of what we carry; what we bring to the altar.

In his commentary on Matthew, Douglas Hare writes, "These verses are illustrative of the hyperbolic power of Jesus' teaching. The advice is eminently impractical. It was surely not possible to leave unattended even a cereal offering in the busy altar area, let alone a pair of pigeons or a lively goat! The point is dramatically made. Whatever our gift to God, its acceptance is conditional upon honest repentance concerning the ways in which we have injured our neighbors."<sup>3</sup>

So on the one hand, Jesus is exaggerating to make a point. We do that. We understand that way of speaking. But on the other hand, Jesus is explaining that worship must be lived out if it is to be true. Put differently, worship that is **NOT** lived out is a fraud. And

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, p. 52

we are playing make believe with God's words and with our own integrity. This is serious stuff, and that is why Jesus links our unforgiveness and disdain for reconciliation with murder.

It is true that every one of us, even the kindest and gentlest in our midst, has a list with at least one name on it of a hard conversation we keep avoiding or a person with whom we hope to never interact again. Each one of us can take Jesus' words seriously. We can stop the service right now, abandon our seats, and go right a wrong in at least one relationship. That work is essential to our soul because we carry those broken relationships like sandbags around our hearts.

But our need to address broken relationships and be reconciled to one another is not the only burden we drag with us into worship.

One of the most important reasons that we gather here each week is to be drawn into community. That is, after all, the reason that we reconcile with one another: so that community is restored and that we finally acknowledge that each one of us is a child of God, created in God's image. We speak forgiveness saying those very words.

But as a community, as a people, we bring with us both the need for reconciliation and the power to enact it on broad levels. And when we ignore our power to make things right, in Jesus' name, then our worship is a charade and our integrity as a people is diminished.

I prepared the first draft of today's sermon thinking only about our need to forgive each other on a micro level: my relationship with you, your relationship with him, his relationship with her. But late yesterday, I began to watch the news feed on Facebook and Twitter as friends awaited the verdict in the Michael Dunn trial for the murder of 17-yr-old Jordan Davis. It is yet another headline out of Florida testing the "Stand Your Ground" law in which a young, black man is perceived to be enough of a threat that he is murdered.

As I watched friends grieving over a story that I had not followed closely, I realized my need for reconciliation. These stories bring to the surface the reality that life experience in this country is not the same for people of different racial presentations. Setting aside details of legal cases, the reality remains that great work is left to be done in race relations. Dear friends raising sons who are black must consider issues of safety and lessons on demeanor that my husband and I would never consider as we raise our white son. At some point in their lives, probably much sooner than I would like to think, Turner Lott and Wayne Hyder will no longer be viewed in the same way by our

culture. As people of faith, as the community who loves and raises these children, it is an act of worship to change the reality of racial discrimination.

There is an immense need for reconciliation in our world, and that is a hard conversation to begin, but the effort is absolutely integral to our acts of worship. To stand before the words of Jesus calling us to abandon our offering until we have made things right with our neighbors requires us to consider difficult, challenging life work. Who remains unwelcome and unsafe in the world around us? What harmful aspects of our culture do we ignore every day because it is more convenient for us to go about our lives than to face the realities of hate and fear and the unknown?

These questions belong in worship, and their answers are varied. Asking God to bring acts of reconciliation to the heart of our worshiping community will mean: honest talks about race and privilege, this will mean we lovingly and compassionately discuss how we welcome and affirm gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, it will mean we cannot ignore the fact that people in our city are sleeping beneath bridges while we live in comfort, it will mean that our faith in Jesus Christ is challenged because we are daily being called to live it out.

If this is to be a place where all are really welcomed, if we truly desire to be a faith community that cherishes diversity and delights in gathering with all who want to grow here, then we will be faced with our need to be forgiven and our need to forgive. We must prepare ourselves to be reconcilers. We must understand reconciliation both on the micro level of face-to-face forgiveness and on the macro level of working for reconciliation in our world. We must be people who fight and advocate and pray, who tear down walls and face our darkness with bravery so that the world around us reflects God's kingdom. We will be changed by this kind of forgiveness. We will be reconciled to one another and to God. I believe this to be true.

Douglas Hare says we are to "reflect the majestic generosity of the kingdom of heaven."<sup>4</sup>

To reflect God's generosity in our relationship and in our culture takes shape in loud and quiet ways—a cup of coffee and a long-avoided conversation, a whispered prayer for someone long ago who still makes your heart pound with anger, a sincere apology, a blessing for the future. It means we love each other even when we fiercely disagree because we hold more in common than the things that might keep us apart.

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, p. 218

It is not instinctual or easy for us to want to love in this abundant, extravagant manner. However, it is God's nature to love and to forgive in this way—to unlock the gates, pardon the debts, release and let go.

May our worship be so true that the majestic generosity of God's kingdom breaks out whenever we draw near to one another.

May our worship be so true that it pours out from these walls and into the city around us.

May our worship be so true that we embrace our God-breathed identity as lovers, reconcilers, peace-makers, creators, world-shapers, bridge builders, shepherds, and friends.

May our worship be so true that our lives reflect the One in whose name we seek to live.

Amen.

Opening story from *The Closed Gate* and used in these sermons:

[February 10, 2006 (Revised February 22, 2006) for BTSR Min. of Preaching]

[February 18, 2007 Northminster Church, Traditional]

[June 13, 2010 Tar Wallet Baptist Church]

[February 16, 2014 St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church]