

Matthew 5:21-37 - Dealing with Anger (16th February 2014) – Rev. Lou Webber

So who here is a murderer? Thought as much, and quite glad, not sure what I'd have done had a few folk put their hands up! But I wonder who here gets angry, who's been angry this week?

I know I have! But you see anger is a dangerous thing after all we all know about the Incredible Hulk don't we. The alter ego of Bruce Banner who when provoked to anger become quite literally a monster 'Don't make me angry you won't like me when I'm angry!' Could the same could be said of you and me when we're angry?

I wonder this morning where the lines are drawn. Piece of paper. Draw some lines around the things on the paper so they are grouped together as you think they should be.

And why am I asking you to do this, I mean what relevance has drawing lines on a piece of paper got with Matthew 5 and anger? Well I think anger can often be about where lines are drawn. When we get angry something has happened that has not kept things within the lines we've drawn. You know things that happen that we don't expect, things not going to plan, things happening in ways unfamiliar and different. Things that don't fit in with the lines we've drawn. I mean I've heard people say as they tell me how angry they are how they simply 'draw the line' at such and such as though that justifies their anger, makes the problem not theirs but everyone else's. We all draw lines, and on one side there are all the things that are acceptable and permissible and on the other are all those things that are not acceptable and not permissible. We all draw lines every day, lines of expectation, behaviour, need, time. We draw them in the church too don't we, draw lines marking who's in and who's out, who's ok to take charge of things and who's not, what's styles of worship are ok and what are not, who'd really be welcome who wouldn't, lines of denomination, and tradition. These lines can often be beneficial, they keep us comfortable, help us to know where we are and what's going on but when the lines are crossed, that's when we can get angry, something's wrong.

I wonder what has made you angry this week. What line has been crossed. I wonder is it one you have drawn? And if so have you in your anger stopped to ask whether that line was ever drawn in the right place to start off with? You see Jesus here in these few words says 'You have heard that it was said.... But I tell you....' it would seem to me that we can rush to draw the lines before listening to where Jesus is asking them to be drawn. We can get angry and think it's not our problem you see, and that's where the real danger lies.

It seems clear here that where Jesus draws the lines might not be all that comfortable for us. I mean we've already established none of us here are murderers surely we don't have much to be worried about with this anger stuff, but just hang on because Jesus rather uncomfortably draws the lines in places that take us to the heart of the matter, to the places within us where actions are conceived and nurtured, it would seem the line is not simply one that separates the action from the emotion/thought/feeling. To say well yeah I've been really angry with this or that but know you've not actually gone round and clobbered someone doesn't mean you're justified, right, or free from judgement.

You see **where Jesus draws the lines we see that our internal attitude is more important than our external offering.** As long as there is internal sin, anger and angst outward acts of worship are not acceptable to God.

Where Jesus draws the lines we see that anger affects our worship. When we bring anger to the altar we can't adore God, worship God as we should. Isaiah 1:15: "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood..." And Isaiah 58:4: "Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high."

Where Jesus draws the lines we realise that He desires holy harmony in His family. Notice how he talks about friction in the family. You see its going to happen! The word "brother" is used four times in verses 22-24. As sons and daughters of the Father the way that you and I treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ says something about our relationship to our Father. I know when there's friction in our family, I want to get it resolved right away. If someone's not getting along, they're going to straighten it out before they go to sleep. If I feel that way about my family, well imagine how God feels about relationships within His family. Galatians 6:10: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

Where Jesus draws the line we see that peacemaking is personal. The verb tenses change in this passage from the plural "you all" to "you" singular: "You have heard it said...but I tell you." This message is not for the masses, not for everyone else it's for you and for me. Its your responsibility to make it right when God reminds you. You know maybe it's no accident that you are thinking about a person right now. Don't dismiss the convicting work of the Holy Spirit within you. Initiate reconciliation whether it's your fault or not. It could be a legitimate gripe, or maybe it's unfounded. It doesn't really matter. If someone has a grudge against you, follow God's nudge and do what you can to make it right.

That's the essence of what Jesus is saying here isn't it? Please get up and make it right, do it today, do it this am, do it now. If you need to leave here and drive somewhere, do it. Why? Because it seems clear to me that God wants us to be at peace more than He wants our praise. He'd rather you live it out than just listen to another sermon and do absolutely nothing. Max Lucado puts it like this : "As far as I know, this is the only time God tells you to slip out of church early. Apparently he'd rather have you give your olive branch than your tithe" ("When God Whispers Your Name," 127).

Make no doubt about it these words are not easy to hear, I've really struggled with them this week, and if you like me know you need to take action what is it that we are to do, how do we go about practically dealing with our anger? Jesus says Matthew 5:23-24: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."

When you know there is tension within a relationship it seems to me Jesus asks you to do 4 things here

1. Leave...even when it's inconvenient. "...leave your gift there in front of the altar..." We need to pause in our praise until we're at peace. 1 Samuel 15:22 says that God is more impressed with our obedience than He with what we may have to offer Him: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams." God would rather have a broken life than a beautiful lamb, gifts only derive their value from the heart of the giver. He would rather have us leave and make peace than lift our hands in praise when we're in conflict with someone.

2. Go...even when you don't want to initiate. "...First go..." Go and find the place of reconciliation with the one we've wronged. The verb tense here suggests an intense effort. It's so easy to think that the other person should take the first step. Notice the word "first" before the word "go." The priority in peacemaking is to resolve everything right away. In this passage, Jesus does not mention the responsibility of the other person to restore the relationship. He puts it squarely on you and on me. God: He cares about you and the person you're angry with and wants to use you to lift the load of conflict from your brother or sister. Jesus is really saying do you know what reconciliation is your responsibility.

3. Be...even when you feel innocent. "...and be reconciled to your brother..." First, leave it. Second, go. Third, be reconciled. The word "reconcile" means to change one's feelings towards another. And sometimes the only way to make things right is to admit that you've been wrong and hey that's not always easy is it? It means addressing everyone involved, all those whom you affected. It means you don't hide behind excuses and admit specifically your attitudes and actions acknowledging the hurt caused and expressing your sorrow about it. It means you accept the consequences, maybe things will never be just as they were before, maybe amends must be made. It means you alter your behaviour, you deliberately decide to change your attitudes and actions and you then ask for forgiveness. I wonder just how different many church fellowships would be if we all took this stuff seriously?

4. Come "...then come and offer your gift." Leave. Go. Be. Come. Reconciliation is important enough to interrupt our worship of God because unresolved anger has already interrupted our worship. A right relationship with God depends on our willingness to maintain a right relationship with one another. But what happens far too often is someone gets angry with someone else and its then easier to stay away and then they never come back because step one is unfortunately pretty easy and too many people just stop there. It's simple to leave because of anger and conflict. The challenge is to complete steps two through to four so that you can come back and worship once again.

It would seem to me that within churches especially we are particularly useless at dealing with anger and conflict, we shy away from it, ignore it in the hope it will just go away or sort itself out. After all we're supposed to all love one another and get on and agree and live in fantastic unity. Well really I think its time we all grew up and started to really listen and take notice of what it is that Jesus is saying here. Anger can make a monster out of anyone, so when you feel angry because your lines have been breached remember the lines that Jesus draws here, they are the ones we are to live within together. Deal with your anger it's about your internal thoughts, feelings and attitudes, it affects worship, it destroys harmony, it's your responsibility. Leave. Go. Be. Come. Making peace is possible and if we really allow these words to direct our living, our choices, our actions and our priorities the church as we know it would be transformed beyond all recognition, because we would be transformed people living lives that enable others to experience the transformation that only a life lived in authentic relationship with God through Jesus Christ can bring.