

The work of a lifetime

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, February 13, 2011, The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany.
Based on Matthew 5:21-37.*

Something huge is happening in the world. The recent revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have shaken us to the core; it really is as though we have felt the earth move under our feet—a shifting, a movement toward something that is good. The unsettledness and anxiety that we feel about what the future will bring in this hotbox of the world notwithstanding—even with that—somehow we know in our democratic hearts that this is good. More than 50 years ago, speaking of events in Ghana, Martin Luther King spoke eloquently of what has now happened in Egypt and Tunisia:

There seems to be a throbbing desire, there seems to be an internal desire for freedom within the soul of every man. And it's there—it might not break forth in the beginning, but eventually it breaks out, for men realize that freedom is something basic. To rob a man of his freedom is to take from him the essential basis of his manhood. To take from him his freedom is to rob him of something of God's image.

I have pondered these events this week alongside my reading of the gospel for today, another passage from the Sermon on the Mount, wondering what if anything these purported teachings of Jesus have to do with the huge events occurring around us. Does the Jesus movement exist to transform individual lives, a sort of best practice manual for moral living, or to change nations, or both? Is its purpose to create disciples for a better way of being religious or for a better way of being human, or both? Honestly, it is hard to say; our scripture helps some, even if it does not give us the final answer. We are not sure how much of this revered sermon Jesus literally delivered, but the words matter historically because they show us how the church has struggled with the thorny issues of life and give us a starting place from which to discern what God is saying to us even now.

I could talk about divorce. I heard on the radio this week that during the worst of the recession, the divorce rate dipped a bit. Good news; but wait. Perhaps as evidence that the economy is improving as some claim, the rate has inched up again. Apparently breaking up is not only hard to do but expensive as well. Whether having gotten a divorce during flush or hard times, many of us know more about it than we wish we did. While there is not a doubt in my mind that many divorces absolutely need to occur, I am equally convinced that every last one of them is sad and represents a rupture, albeit at times a necessary one, that hurts for a long time and always leaves a scar. But by the grace of God, I also know that life and goodness and hope and integrity are not its permanent victims. Whatever Jesus said or didn't say about divorce, the overriding message of the Christ of our faith is that there can be life even after death—whatever kind of death.

I could talk about adultery. Jimmy Carter, God bless him, immortalized a certain take on the words of this passage when he confessed to having lustfully glanced at women. Even when he said it 30 years ago, I thought, "Oh, I wish you hadn't said that." I think I know what he meant, but in my opinion the comment required a bit more exegesis than the *Playboy* article allowed. Despite what the church has seemed to suggest over the millennia, Jesus was not urging sexual repression but sexual responsibility. Jesus is remembered as teaching us to move from the letter of the law to the spirit of the law, all the while claiming unmistakably that fidelity is better than the lack of it. And so it is. Monogamy, at least serial monogamy, is a standard that I believe is not only righteous but the right ordering of life, which is to say: it works.

I could talk about bearing false witness or oath-taking in general. The bearing false witness part is pretty straightforward, but none of the discussions I have ever heard about the teaching on taking an oath has made much sense to me, too great a cultural lag I suppose. One comment attributed to Jesus just at the end of this passage, though, must not be missed: *Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one.* That really sounds like Jesus to me. I think it is an early incarnation of the advice: say what you mean and mean what you say. Can you imagine what the world would be like if we really did that?

All of that is really good sermon material. But the portion of the gospel today that strikes me the most, particularly in light of world events, is Jesus' words about anger and the need for reconciliation. Every psychologist worth anything will rightly tell us that bottling our anger is not healthy. I know this to be true; but the longer I live—and particularly the longer I use the subway as my principle form of conveyance—I have a growing sense that some people need to

bottle their anger a bit more than they do. The reference to anger in this verse is not the kind of irritation that arises over some small or even large infraction but a deep, abiding anger that separates us from one another longer than it must. It is the kind of anger that gives life to itself; the more we harbor it, the more we find ourselves invested in nurturing it to keep it alive. In this way it becomes institutionalized; and as in all institutions, the preservation of it becomes disproportionately important. We almost treasure it and are clearly loath to release it.

This kind of anger, Jesus says, stands in the way of our finding God. He claims that it is more important to be reconciled with your brother or sister than it is to bring a gift to the altar. Did you hear that? If ever evidence were needed that ours is a faith of the incarnation, this is it. Jesus says, "Don't even think about giving to God until you have done all you can to reconcile with those around you." That is a challenge for a churchperson to preach. I would be tempted to say, "Oh, go ahead and give; and then go reconcile if you can." Just more evidence, though none be needed, that God is God and I'm not.

The work of reconciliation is *the* work of our lives as people of faith. And it may be particularly hard to remain reconciled in faith matters. We care so deeply about these concerns; and almost invariably being able to firmly believe that we are right about church issues is important on both sides, whatever the topic. I don't have the last word on how to negotiate such waters, but I do know this: even being right does not give us the license to be mean. Meanness in anger is an awful thing to encounter in others and an even worse and cancerous thing to harbor in our own souls.

Do you remember the story a few years ago of the shooting in an Amish one-room schoolhouse in Pennsylvania? A gunman inexplicably stormed in one morning, killed several children, and then killed himself. Almost immediately the families of the children who had died reached out to care for the family of the man who had committed the heinous act. Though devastated by their loss, they professed, and I believe meant, their forgiveness for the shooter, claiming that because they were forgiven, they could forgive. A researcher observing their behavior said this of them, "The hurt they feel is very great, but they don't balance the hurt with hate."

Hate does not balance or neutralize hurt; in fact, a heart that is not reconciled is a heart made so hard by hate that even God has trouble entering it. Of course, it isn't easy to reconcile, to forgive, but somehow the call to do just that—to forgive, to reconcile, regardless of who is right or wrong—lies at the heart of what it means to be or to seek to be a follower of Jesus. The work of reconciliation in the world starts within our own hearts. We cannot be peacemakers beyond ourselves until we confront the lack of reconciliation in our own lives.

And, so in the end I am left with the question: what do these teachings from the Sermon on the Mount have to do with this remarkable moment in history? I am not sure, maybe nothing, maybe everything. In Egypt this week we witnessed a revolution of peaceful resolve, enacted with only a minimal amount of violence. The people of Egypt, in the spirit of Martin Luther King, reached a milestone in their fight for freedom, never taking their eyes from the prize and thereby reaching their goal through peaceful means. Regardless of what happens tomorrow or next month, this one moment goes in the column of goodness. It moves me and connects me to the truth of my tradition by reminding me that God is on the side of peace and justice always, and that my role is to live a life of peace and reconciliation that is worthy of the one whose path I attempt to follow.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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