

We Interrupt This Worship Service...  
Matthew 5:21-37  
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Epiphany 6, Year A  
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There are Biblical texts that are too jarring to read and not preach. Today, we grapple with one of those, from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. In the last couple of weeks, Micah and Isaiah, and their calls to justice. Today, we get murder, reconciliation, adultery, divorce, and giving your authentic word. Although the focus of this sermon will be on reconciliation and authenticity, first let's tackle the hyperbole and the context in which Jesus spoke.

"You have heard it said.... But I say to you... "Jesus doesn't so much abolish the law as transform it.

*If your right eye offends you, pluck it out.*

This hyperbole is a very compelling argument against taking the Bible literally. There are fundamentalists who make that claim- that the Bible "says what it means and means what it says."

My response is, "Did you ever meet someone so ill that they took this passage literally?" I did clinical pastoral education at Eastern State Hospital in Williamsburg, Va. Jesus did not intend a man I met there to take this text literally. Presbyterians bring a historical and theologically critical view to reading scripture. Thank God. We take the Bible seriously, but certainly not always literally. There are thematic threads- love God and neighbor, do justice and work to end oppression, repent, forgive... there is also story, myth and exaggeration.

One of the best sermons (interpreting that word liberally) on adultery came from humanitarian, Habitat for Humanity Founder, and former President Jimmy Carter, who still teaches Sunday School. He famously said, "I have lusted in my heart." His humility, not judging, recognizing human frailty was an act of solidarity- a reframing of the story found elsewhere- let the one without sin cast the first stone.

The context in which Jesus spoke about adultery was one in which Patriarchy was firmly established. In taking on adultery and divorce, Jesus made an epic paradigm shift. In his context, the wife was property of her husband, and the husband had exclusive rights to her, so he could ensure that any children were his. The violation was against her husband, because she literally belonged to him, like property.

The same was true of divorce- only a man could initiate divorce. The woman had no rights. Depending upon whose interpretation he followed, it could be for something as capricious as ruining dinner. A woman could be left destitute by divorce.

In Jesus' paradigm., women were disciples and sisters. He was speaking a radical word! We also recognize human frailty. Sometimes there are broken relationships. We do the best we can to find our way- to mend and transform, to be loving, justice-seeking, ethical people. It is hard work, and we do it imperfectly.

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.

This is where the sermon title comes in: at the risk of having people get up and leave the service to resolve a dispute...

Jesus has a great deal in common with Micah and Isaiah after all. Human relationships of love and justice are more important to him, even more than making an offering in worship! He may not literally mean get up and leave to resolve a difference, but he vividly makes the point that reconciliation is desirable.

(Jesus expected people to get angry- if it were not so, he violates his own injunction with his righteous anger at the corruption he sees with the temple money changers and elsewhere. He strives to meet hostility with care and attention rather than estrangement.)

When my life-long friend Priscilla and I were children, we devised what we considered the perfect strategy for making amends. We fought like sisters sometimes. So that neither of us would have to apologize first, we would count to 3, and simultaneously say, "I'm sorry." To the best of our recollection, we were honorable and did not leave the other hanging.

In Catholic grade school, I became good friends with a girl named Terry. We were both academically solid and had a lot in common. But somehow, we became bitter enemies- to such a degree that by 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation, we did not speak. This was unusual. I cannot recall another time when a close friendship ended with absolute acrimony. Had I been conversant with the Bible then, I should have left Mass and gone to resolve the dispute. We went to different high schools. I didn't see her again...

Until a dozen or so years later. I had just finished my first year of seminary and was working as a waitress in a Pizza place- and in comes Terry with a guy. And I am assigned to

her table. I immediately decide I will say nothing about our estrangement. I'm going to pretend to just be the waitress.

But then she says to me, "You're Donna Elia." I acknowledge her name. Now I'm embarrassed. Being waitress is an honorable profession, but I want to assert that I'm a grad student. While I'm still figuring out what to do, she blurts out, "We hated each other!" But she said it with kind of laugh, like what did we do that for? And I realized not only did I not hate her, I couldn't remember why I ever had! It was the lifting of a burden. Kudos to her for speaking up. We did get to talk about what we were doing with our lives at that time, and what a grace-filled moment it became!

Not all relationships can be mended, but we do our best. We continue to lean in the direction of reconciliation. We pursue love and justice. We do that as individuals and collectively as communities- interpersonal and interwoven. From family and friendship to allyship with oppressed peoples. In some ways, the work of antiracism is leaving the gift at the altar to go and pursue justice.

Value authenticity and truth-telling- let your yes be yes and your no be no. Strive to walk in integrity. The reference to swearing has nothing to do with salty language, but about speaking plainly and honestly to the best of our ability.

Likely we remember Poet Amanda Gorman, a young African American woman who recited her work at the inauguration of President Biden. From her book, Call Us What We Carry, this work, *Every Day We Are Learning*:

Every day we are learning

How to live with essence, not ease.

How to move with haste, never hate.

How to leave this pain that is beyond us

Behind us.

Just like a skill or any art,

We cannot possess hope without practicing it.

It is the most fundamental craft we demand of ourselves.

Amen.