

**Sermon for Sunday, February 12, 2017**  
**St James Episcopal Church, St James NY**  
**Rachel Marie Stone**

We don't even know why they hated each other.

The two families were similar in social standing and wealth,  
Both made up of mothers and fathers and children and cousins,  
Servants and friends.

What did they have against each other?  
We don't know.  
Still, there were rude gestures in the street,  
There were nasty words flung back and forth,  
There were insults, scuffles, duels, and a death.

Then a revenge killing, and caught up in the middle were  
Two young people, one from each side,  
Neither of whom knew or understood what the fighting was all about.

They fall in love with one another  
And seek to be married secretly.  
The priest that marries them hopes that their love will help end the war between their two  
families  
But it turns out to be a tragedy.  
In the end, only their deaths bury their parents' strife.

Romeo and Juliet isn't a true story, of course,  
But we've all experienced conflict, and anger, and arguments --  
Even, and sometimes especially the kind that have very little or nothing at the root of it  
all.

"What started the argument?"

Well -- 'he looked at me oddly,'  
'She rolled her eyes,'  
'He said something in a snappish tone' --  
'I don't know, really,' and then it escalates.

These kinds of things aren't limited to interaction among individuals or families;

Whole nations and whole regions erupt in wars that rage for years,  
 Wars have begun because of a perceived difference, a perceived insult,  
 A small act of violence that prompts a larger, retaliatory measure, and then a larger one,  
 and, soon, the violence boils over.

Perhaps this is why Jesus has such hard words for us on anger and insults.

Here, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is preaching from the Hebrew Bible, which we often call the “Old Testament.”

He is not repealing the Old Testament law, nor is he replacing it -- in last week’s gospel, he says as much -- I have not come to abolish the law.

Instead, Jesus is explaining it:

“you’ve heard that it was said to those in ancient times, ‘do not murder.’ You know that whoever murders will be subject to judgment.

But I’m also saying this to you --

Being angry also makes you ‘liable to judgment,’  
 Hurling insults also makes you ‘liable to judgment’”

Of course, the anger that’s within any one of us isn’t the sort of thing that can be examined by a court, the way a murder can be tried.

And being quietly and privately furious at someone in your heart isn’t the same as actually committing violence against them.

But Jesus’s point is that anger is at the heart of the problem,  
 Anger is a seed that can -- and often does -- blossom into violence.

The law says, “do not murder,” and Jesus says in effect,  
 “Do not allow to take root that which can grow into violence.”  
 It’s not that God just wants us to refrain from killing each other  
 God wants us to act as one another’s friend and keeper.

In a famous passage of his Confessions, St. Augustine recounts  
 what he was like as a baby --

(he doesn’t really remember this, of course; he’s trying to make a point.)

He cried, was impatient for his milk, was envious of his foster brother, was greedy and selfish --

The so-called innocence of babies, Augustine says, is not actual innocence.

The souls of babies aren't actually innocent --  
 it's just that their bodies are too weak to carry out their actual desires.  
 If you've cared for a toddler in a tantrum you might agree.  
 Of course, we teach children to think of others, and as we grow,  
 we gain the capacity to imagine what other people are thinking and feeling  
 We gain the capacity to love others as we love ourselves.  
 This, along with the ability to control our bodies, comes with maturity.

I shudder to think about the things that I've thought --  
 Can you imagine if we actually acted out the things that are in our hearts and minds?  
 While the vast majority of people don't go about physically harming people,  
 Most of us do inflict wounds of a different kind --

Harsh words. An angry gesture at the other driver.  
 A contemptuous huff and puff for the too-slow cashier or restaurant server.  
 A too-rough slam of the car door.  
 These things are small, and yet they pool together; gather momentum.  
 An angry word for the receptionist puts her in a foul mood,  
 She snaps at the next person who calls,  
 Who then slams the phone down and yells at her child,  
 Who then goes and pulls the dog's tail.  
 How many people's days can be soured by one act of unkindness!  
 And often at the root of it is our failure to remember  
 That each soul I encounter is also like me:  
 An image of God, and deserving of respect and love.

Jesus is saying that it's not good enough for us to just refrain from murdering one another.

He's telling us to deal with our anger and contempt towards others,  
 because anger and contempt lead to all kinds of things that degrade and destroy other  
 human beings -- our fellow images of God.  
 And he's telling us to manage our disagreements while they are small  
 To prevent them from growing into something big.

Anger and insults and resentments are poisons that kill slowly,  
 And they don't only harm our targets --  
 They harm us.  
 The well known quotation goes like this -- "holding onto anger and resentment is like  
 taking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die."

Anger and hatred don't just harm the ones the anger is aimed at  
 Anger and hatred eat away at our souls, too,  
 Distorting the image of God in us.

Reconciling with people we have insulted or wronged in some way takes priority, Jesus says --

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  
 Then come and offer your gift.

So even religious observance comes second to reconciliation.

We Christians today don't offer sacrifices, of course,  
 but we do come to church to worship,  
 To sing and pray and receive the sacraments.

And still Jesus says to us  
 First, tend to your anger. Reconcile with those you've wronged.

Jesus is not exactly saying that getting along with one another is more important than worshipping God.

He's saying that if we claim to love and worship God,  
 but at the same time, we hate and act unjustly toward and insult our neighbor,

Our worship is false, empty, hypocritical, worthless.  
 We can't claim to love and follow and worship God  
 While holding on to hate for our neighbor.

It's like St. Paul writes: you can have faith that moves mountains,  
 But if you haven't got love for your neighbor, you have nothing.

It's like St. John writes in his letter: if a person claims to love God but hates her neighbor, she is a liar.

Jesus urges his listeners to seek forgiveness and reconciliation right away --

Leave your sacrifice right there on the altar and go  
 Stop whatever it is you're doing and go  
 Ask for forgiveness. Be reconciled before it escalates.  
 Before resentment grows and grows and grows.

God's law doesn't just restrain our hands -- don't murder --  
It restrains our hearts, too.

This is why when we confess our sins, we confess that we have sinned  
In thought, word, and deed.

We make this confession and we share the peace with one another Before we receive the  
Eucharist

Before we eat from the One Bread, we perform a visible sign of our reconciliation, with  
God and with one another:

We take one another's hands, and speak peace.

The words of confession can come easily, but  
reconciliation isn't easy.

It's embarrassing to admit that we were wrong

It takes a lot of strength to let go of our anger  
when someone else has wronged us.

It takes courage to say will you forgive me?

Our culture often feeds us the lie that compromise is weak.

That compassion is weak.

That apologies are weak.

Strong people make no apologies, put themselves first, broker no compromises.

But this is not the way of Jesus.

Jesus teaches us an unexpected way --

He knows that our souls are distorted

And our relationships destroyed

When we put ourselves first,

When we hold on to resentments

When we refuse to forgive.

He invites us into a life of love and flourishing,

Of being more fully human.

Of living at peace with God and our neighbor

And he invites us to begin it right away.