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Matthew 5: 21-37

### Now What?!

As many of you know, I recently attended and participated in the Mid-Winter lectures put on by Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. I was their preacher and led worship services, as well as sat on a panel for discussions about all we were learning together. It was an energetic and exhausting time. One thing that continued to surface throughout the week, though, was the reality that many of the Presbyteries and the Presbyterian churches in Texas are going through a lot of transition.

Some of the larger congregations in Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio are either beginning or finishing the “discernment time” about whether or not to stay in the PCUSA or to pull out go to the EPC or to the new denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians. But it is not just large congregations making these decisions. Other smaller congregations all around the Lone Star State are doing the same thing.

Many of those in that time of discernment claim that the PCUSA has left them or has left our strong stance on the authority of Scripture. And though the fissures are more nuanced and complex than that, and many of the tensions have been around for decades, those in church leadership with these discerning congregations will usually refer to General Assembly decisions that were ratified by the Presbyteries two years ago that allow for ordination regardless of sexual orientation. And they are also anticipating possible General Assembly decisions about marriage to be made this summer, decisions that may or may not be made, but will certainly be prayerfully discussed.

I am not sure how many of the leaders of the churches considering leaving were at the lectures, but their brothers and sisters from their Presbyteries and other churches in town were there. I saw them. I know many of them. And for many of those folks, anxiety, anger, and disappointment are a few of the emotions they are keeping just below the surface. So when I preached on the first night that Jesus calls us not only to be reconciled with one another but also to do all that we can to lean into that reconciliation, conversations began and lasted the rest of the week.

Some of those conversations have continued. On one of our many snow days this week, I received a message on Facebook from a pastor who had been at the lectures. He wanted me to know that he was trying to practice what I had preached. He had tried to be honest and to seek reconciliation with another pastor in his Presbytery. Now, that other pastor leads one of the congregations that is considering whether or not to leave. Yet when my friend approached his brother in Christ to begin a conversation about the pain he felt yet why he also believed Jesus called him to reach out for a repair of that relationship, the other pastor turned on his heels and walked away. Now what, my friend asked me. Now what, indeed.

I imagine the preacher Matthew was asking a similar question. Scholars are fairly united in thinking that Matthew’s community was primarily made up of Jewish Christians. They revered

the Torah, but they also welcomed Jesus as the Christ. Furthermore, some of them were even open to Gentile converts and to growing their church, two moves that put them into even more areas of conflict with some of the other synagogues in town. More than likely, Matthew's congregation had either left the synagogue or been kicked out. And Matthew's church was almost certainly located in an urban, cosmopolitan environment which tells us that not everyone looked the same, believed the same, or belonged to the same clan<sup>i</sup>. So surely with all of that diversity swirling around, our Gospel writer, our preacher, Matthew understood what it felt like to have a fractured communion or a fractured community.

He, too, probably heard parking lot discussions that would take place after meetings. He would have known who was saying what around town and about whom. Perhaps he had even been like my pastor friend and tried to have conversations with folks who disagreed with him and who had kicked him out of their fellowship. Perhaps his church's environment was rather similar to the environment of our denomination today-- the different groups each felt excluded by the others.

And each group probably felt justified in its anger or frustration with the others, too. It was about justice. It was about purity. It was about biblical authority. It was about biblical interpretation. The church fights were about all of those things and much, much more. And so as Matthew was putting together the story of Jesus and all of Jesus' words, maybe he was saying in his head, "Now what?" And if he had not asked that question before, then surely after he linked Jesus' sermon on the mount together and recalled the words we heard today, he asked the "Now What" question then.

"You've heard that people were told in the past, 'Do not murder; anyone who commits murder will be brought before the judge.' But now I tell you: whoever is angry with his brother or sister will be brought before the judge; whoever calls his brother or sister 'You good-for-nothing!' will be brought before the Council; and whoever calls his brother or sister a worthless fool will be in danger of going to the fire of hell<sup>ii</sup>. So when you are offering your gift at the altar and there you recall 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, only then, come and offer your gift." I don't know Jesus, Matthew might have thought. That's sure a tough answer to the "now what" question.

I agree with Matthew. I mean, I get the murder part. You shall not kill. That makes sense. But, then, Jesus takes the whole thing to a much more dramatic level. Anyone who is angry with another gets dragged before the judge. If you call someone else "Raca," which, roughly translated, means dumb or good-for-nothing, you are dragged not just before the Black Mountain town council, but in front of the Supreme Court. And finally, in Jesus' increasingly stepped up rhetoric, telling somebody they are a worthless fool or an Idiot, will get you condemned to the fiery garbage dump of judgment. And I thought I was dramatic!

And that is just half of what Jesus says in this small part of the longer passage—one that moves on to questions of divorce, taking oaths, retaliation, etc.. Immediately after causing our jaws to drop, Jesus moves to worship. If someone has a problem with you, he says, leave your offering in the aisle, or beside your place in the pew, go and find that person and be reconciled first. And then, only after that happens, come back and give your gift to God. In other words, don't give

your offering until your relationships are made right again. Let's just pause for a moment and imagine church budget implications. If you have any conflict with another person, member of this congregation or not, you first need to go and make it right. And only after you do that, do you come back to worship and make your offering. Can you imagine?

This is tough stuff. In this section from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is taking everything to a different level, an even higher standard. So if we really want to know "Now what?" he'll tell us. Because not only is Jesus telling his followers to obey the commandments they received as Israel as central to covenant life with God, but he is also telling them it's time to take it a deeper level--to get in touch with the spirit behind the commandments.

Yes, you shall not kill. BUT, you also shall not give into the power of destructive anger which leads to disrespect for another's life. (Something way too easily done these days with the power of social media) Yes, you shall not kill. But, you also shall not try to destroy another person with your words—especially not if they are cloaked in religious language. Yes, you shall not kill. But you also shall not judge that someone else is worthless and can be discriminated against. That is an insult to God who is also their maker. Yes, you shall not kill. But you also shall not make your offering in worship without making your relationships right. Practice what you preach. We get the picture, don't we. Jesus is taking the "now what" question about our responsibility in discipleship to a whole new level. By expounding on the commandment, Jesus does not give any of us an opening for escape or for just turning on our heels and walking away.

Surely the first people who heard these words from Jesus as they gathered around him felt as challenged as we do, as those early Jewish Christians in Matthew's church surely did. We are just regular, broken people, after all. So it is a tall order to hear about the need to keep anger in check; to hear that we need to keep the way we speak to one another and judge one another in check; and to hear that before we can bring our offering forward, we are to seek out those with whom we have a conflict and try to make things right.

Frankly, for some of us, that might be hard to even imagine in our own family life, let alone congregational life or in communal life with those not in the church. Take just a second and bring to mind someone with whom you have a conflict. Can you imagine trying to make that right before participating in worship again? Did I just kill next week's attendance? I am sort of kidding, but not completely. It might be hard to imagine, but that does not mean that we are excused from even trying, from doing what my friend did and at least beginning a conversation.

In this Sermon on the Mount, we hear Jesus calling for his body, for those of us in the church, to live out God's Reign HERE and NOW, even though complete fulfillment is still on the way. He is calling for the Church to live in a way that actively practices what is coming. He is calling for the Church to order its life so that we, as David Buttrick puts it, are an Advance Guard for God's Reign<sup>iii</sup>. With his words, Jesus is challenging the Church to order our life together in a way that tries to put these demands of discipleship into practice. As my father used to preach – Jesus desires that we live as an Island of Already in a Sea of Not Yet.

One implication of Jesus' desire for us is that we try to imagine how we could order our life as both disciples and as a church so that anger never gets to fester below the surface, or so that the

way we speak to each other is always with respect and care, even in those times when we are frustrated or disappointed. How might we, as disciples and as a congregation, speak in a voice that is driven by Love and Light, as a counter testimony to the voices of Anger and Hate? And what might that look like down in Raleigh, or up in Kansas, or over in DC? What might that look like at Owen Middle School, or at Haywood Street, or at the Buncombe County School Board meetings? I am not sure, but it sounds like being the Island of Already in the Sea of Not Yet.

Or, bringing it closer, what if the time of the passing of the peace was not only the time in which we greet those we know and those we don't know, but also a time for people in conflict to either work it out or to simply acknowledge that they need to work it out. That way, we could all be more fully here, carrying less baggage when we leave than when we arrived. For more than likely, providing a time for that kind of actual reconciliation before the offering is why the Kiss of Peace came into being in the first place. But can you imagine treating it like that, as an opportunity for us to get right with each other, to make our relationships with each other a weekly priority? That would be something, wouldn't it? We'd be practicing our life as an Island of Already in a Sea of Not Yet.

We will keep dreaming about this together. We will keep imagining about what this might look like for us—all these centuries later. Because Jesus is determined to not let us stay the way we are. He will not let us be satisfied with the status quo of sin and brokenness. Rather, he is determined to love us and call us into living more and more fully into his image. Into being more and more who he has created us to be. Into making and remaking us into his living body here in this world. Until the day of not yet becomes the day of already. And until we no longer even need to ask the “now what?” again.

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<sup>i</sup> Long, Thomas. Matthew. Page 2

<sup>ii</sup> Translation by Thor Hall, found in Sermons from Duke Chapel. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. Page 101.

<sup>iii</sup> Buttrick, David. Speaking Jesus: Homiletic Theology and The Sermon on the Mount. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, pp 99-100.