

“TURNING TO PEACE”

Matthew 5:21-26, 38-48; Mark 3:1-6

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It's hard to feel peaceful these days.

We hear Jesus' words about murder and anger – so often the soil from which violent acts sprout – and we know the truth of those words, for we see it in our world.

We hear Jesus tell us to seek reconciliation, to refrain from retaliation, to respond to attempts to take advantage with unearned kindness... even to love our enemies.

And we may be able to understand the wisdom of what Jesus asks of us: somehow endless cycles of hate and revenge have to be interrupted, amends need to be made, people brought together so communities can heal. Those who are held in the grip of hate need to see a different way, to experience the possibilities of love. It's important that we learn to see that others – all, even those who make themselves (or who we experience as) our enemies, are children of God, living under the same sky, objects of the same divine love we know.

We can see that this is what the world needs, but it is hard to get ourselves there.

There is so much anger all around us, and it feels toxic, dangerous, unpredictable... and scary. It's not surprising to feel angry ourselves in return. It's also not surprising that sometimes we want to do whatever we can to avoid having to deal with it.

But we still have to deal with our own anger... and there is certainly plenty in the world to be angry about:

Brutal wars with no end in sight

Prejudice and hate in all their many forms, and the threats they pose to people we care about

A shocking number of scams targeting elderly, lonely, and vulnerable people

Technology that lends itself as readily to spreading lies and hate as to enabling connections, and that makes it oh-so-easy to say hurtful things to or about a complete stranger

Leaders and “influencers” whose words promote fear and violence

Hypocrisy in so many places

The persistence of poverty alongside obscene affluence

Environmental crises everywhere we look, ... such fierce resistance to doing anything about it.

More personally...

The demands – overwhelming, often unfair – that life makes of us, and our own inability to “keep up” with expectations

Indifferent bureaucracies -impossible-to-navigate - and systems that fail us or those we love

People we trusted who let us down, misunderstand us, hurt or betray or lie to us

Constant change which leaves feeling like we're losing things that are important to us
A feeling of powerlessness to resist forces we barely understand

I confess that a lot of the time I find myself exhausted with feeling both angry and helpless in the face of it all.

I know that some people just try not to think about those things – avoid listening to news, stick with uplifting or escapist reading or entertainment, stay away from conversation about current events. I guess I'm just not very good at denial. But I also can't believe that Jesus has really called us to be ignorant of or disengaged from the world.

And the truth is that no matter how much we might like to believe that all those things "out there" don't have anything to do with our lives, sooner or later we find out differently:

There's no good care for your elderly loved one. The program your child needs has been cut. Gun violence strikes close to home. Someone you know was cheated. Somebody else was a victim of violence. A beautiful place nearby becomes a strip mall. Technological change eliminates a family member's job. Your neighbor puts an offensive sign in his yard. A grandchild becomes the target of hate. A relationship with a friend is never the same again after you hear her racist words. You realize your employer has no real concern for you.

How can you not be angry?

Sometimes – when we can't get to the real target of our anger – it comes out in other contexts – perhaps expressed toward those closest to us, over seemingly trivial things, or toward inconsiderate drivers, uncooperative technology, telephone solicitors, unhelpful store clerks. Sometimes we take out our anger on ourselves, as if we should somehow be able to cope better with it all. Sometimes we pretend not to be angry – because anger is frightening, or "not nice" (an attitude women, particularly, are socialized into). But that can be harmful as well as dishonest.

How to navigate all this? How in this environment can we be faithful, honest... and turn our hearts toward a place of peace. Today's story, I think, might offer us some clues.

The first few verses of Mark's 3rd chapter tell a simple story in which Jesus is navigating an environment of anger.

If you look back at the previous chapter, you'll see that the leaders of the religious community are already angry with Jesus. They don't like his teaching. They think he is blasphemous. He doesn't follow the rules and customs of their community; in fact, he challenges them... which amounts to a challenge to the authority of the leaders themselves.

It may be that they feel jealous of – threatened by - his growing popularity. Maybe they genuinely see their faith under threat. Maybe they know, and will not admit, that they've made rules into an idol, and a living faith into something rigid and false. Maybe they just don't like change. Maybe

they don't want their lives or religion to be in any way different from what they've known. Maybe they are afraid.

Whatever it is, already we sense the simmering anger, and the beginnings of what will become a plot to kill Jesus. These folks don't say anything, but when Jesus comes into the synagogue they are watching him, looking for something to accuse him of. And they know exactly what they're looking for. What's more, they are willing to make use of a man with a disability to serve their purpose.

Some commentators suggest that the man didn't just *happen* to be present, but was brought into the synagogue deliberately to set up the confrontation with Jesus over what is and isn't proper observance of sabbath. That's could well have been what happened.

Because it's very possible that this man wouldn't normally have been a welcome participant in his community's religious life. Because of his disability, he very likely would have been considered disqualified to take leadership role. Attitudes toward this man and others like him were probably influenced by one of a long, complicated (and sometimes contradictory) set of "holiness codes" which form part of the book of Leviticus... the idea being that out of respect for God's holiness and perfection, offerings brought to the altar should not be brought by a priest with physical "imperfections." It was also common belief at the time that illness or disability could be a punishment or a sign of God's disfavor. A reason to keep somebody out or on the sidelines, to preserve the purity of the religious community.

At any rate, however it happened that this man was present, he certainly *wasn't* there because the leaders of his community were trying to help him.

Now, I might be reading this into the text, but I kind of have the feeling that these religious leaders' anger extends to include this man who is unable to use his hand. Possibly they view him as an inconvenience, a burden, an embarrassment, someone socially and morally their inferior. At best, he matters not at all to them – except now as someone they can use. They don't seem to regard him as a part of their community. There's no indication that they care what happens to him. They refuse to discuss with Jesus whether Jewish law allows one to do good on the sabbath. (It does, lest you get the mistaken impression that the law is only full of irrational and oppressive restrictions. The Pharisees surely know it).

But they really did not want to see this man healed. After Jesus heals the man, there's not a flicker of gladness for him, not a hint of understanding how life-changing this is, no sense that healing and wholeness are to be celebrated.

In fact, the Pharisees have put themselves in an untenable position here: they didn't really want the man to be healed, but they wanted to catch Jesus in the act of healing (which they classify as sabbath-breaking work).

After they witness this healing, they are more angry than ever. What must it be like to be so angry that you only get angrier when something good or empowering happens to someone much more vulnerable than you?

Anger takes a lot of forms, and many of them are kind of irrational. To me, one of the lowest is anger directed downward, at those who are weaker, poorer, more vulnerable, less powerful. But anger like that is commonplace in our culture. “Punching down,” I think they call it. We hear it all the time: Anger at the poor (especially if they spend money in ways we don’t approve). Anger at immigrants (even while their labor is essential to the economy). Anger at homeless people (although we don’t want them housed in our neighborhoods). Anger at drug addicts (who deserve to suffer for their bad choices). Anger at people protesting injustice (“but why do they have to be so *angry?*”) and on and on. The level of anger around these things is really pretty astonishing.

Our society doesn’t want to heal these hurts. That would require a radically different set of priorities. So we have the anger instead: blaming the victim, imagining that these folks are our enemies, or at least not our responsibility. Even if we don’t buy into all those stereotypes and judgement – and I don’t believe most of us do – it’s pervasive and insidious. It’s easy to get drawn in ... especially when someone else is angry and inviting us to share their disdain.

What we see Jesus do in this situation gives us some clues about what we might to *do* with the anger swirling around us and within us.

To begin with, he doesn’t avoid it, or allow the threat of anger to manipulate him. The situation may be hostile but it doesn’t affect the peace he has within himself about *who he is* and *why he’s there*. He doesn’t change course, go someplace else, or choose a less-confrontational path just to avoid the anger and enmity of those who are threatened by him.

Jesus sees the indifference of the Pharisees both to the disabled man and to the spirit of the law... and his response is ... *anger*. Different from the anger that’s being directed at him, but anger.

It’s ok to be angry. In fact, it’s perfectly appropriate to be angry when people are callously using someone else, treating them unfairly, standing in the way of what they need. It’s right to be angry when religion is an excuse for excluding, ignoring suffering, and wielding power.

So Jesus is angry. Notice that he doesn’t hide it. Apparently hiding our anger is not necessarily required.

But then, there’s what I feel as sort of a shift.

Jesus is angry And then he’s grieved. He’s “grieved at their hardness of heart.”

It’s not clear to me that he stops being angry, exactly; but it’s as if he turns from anger to grief. He loves the Pharisees, as much as he loves this man who can’t use his hand, as much as he loves the other people he’s healed, as much as he loves his disciples. It’s a sorrow for him that they cannot

turn from their love of power, their need to control, long enough to hear that his good news could be for them, too.

This shift makes me wonder if it might not help us, too, if we can turn from the destructive pull and push of anger toward *grief* instead.

I know what you must be thinking: grief is not any more pleasant a place to be in than anger. That's true.

But maybe grieving lets us see a situation – or a person – differently. Maybe it sets us on common ground all human beings share. Maybe it lets in a tiny bit of empathy. Maybe it frees us a little bit from the parts of our anger that are selfish, or destructive, or too consuming. Maybe it sets us on a different path.

I don't know how far it gets us toward loving our enemies or being more careful about what we do with our anger or dealing better with an angry world ... but if it turns us in a new direction, maybe it could be a start. Maybe it turns us toward peace.

In the story, Jesus, grieved by the situation, turns to the man. He's already said to him, "come forward" – the Greek word here means "rise up." That is an empowering word! Now he says, "stretch out your hand." He could have made a bigger deal of his own power to heal, but he just says the word, and allows the man to reach out and discover what it's like to be healed.

In the end, how Jesus responds demonstrates a true observance of "sabbath" that contrasts with the Pharisees' superficial, selfish, and limiting one. Sabbath in its truest sense is an invitation to deep reliance on God, not to exert our power. Sabbath is a vision of a world of enough. It's healing, wholeness, justice, community, renewal, ... and peace. For everyone.

This Lent, we are thinking about repentance as *turning*.

Doesn't this story invite us to turn from fear to courage?

From anger toward a deep grieving for the pains of our world

and the people around us,

and our enemies,

and also our own pain?

From grief to compassion?

From all the fears that can easily immobilize us to doing something that brings healing, multiplies compassion, increases the good in the world?

Doesn't Jesus way of being in this story invite us to turn toward sabbath peace?

Resource:

Feasting on the Gospels: Mark, Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds.

The Seven Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism by Carter Heyward