

Called to Wholeness, Part I

February 12, 2017

Matthew 5:21-37

Well, that's a doozy of a gospel text! Murder, adultery, divorce, lying—please, Pastor, couldn't we go back to those cute salt and light pictures we had last week? Maybe you could throw in some puppy and kitten videos to take the edge off.

Let's dig a little deeper. The focus today is on wholeness—with a “wh,” not an “h.” We're discussing people, not doughnuts.

We are called to wholeness. That's the main thought today. **We are called to wholeness.**

Jesus describes what Parker Palmer calls “the pathology of the divided life.” He writes, “The divided life, at bottom, is not a failure of ethics. It is a failure of human wholeness.”

There is no shortage of ethics in this reading. But there is a shortage of life.

This is the dividedness that we would call “compartmentalizing.” Parker Palmer calls that a “six-syllable name for the divided life”. The result is temporary peace and long-term emptiness.

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That's such a big idea that we need two weeks to get through it. So today is part one of two part message.

Pay attention to the center of this reading. “*So when you are offering your gift at the altar,*” Jesus tells the crowd. “*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 text is the basis for our liturgical practice of sharing the peace. Sharing the peace is a way that we enact this call to wholeness. We make our worship and our work fit together.

For some people, sharing the peace is the worst part of the service. What is it good for?

Sharing God's peace is not another way to say “Good Morning.” Sharing God's peace is not for catching up on news with your neighbor. Sharing God's peace is not for reminding someone about an upcoming meeting. Sharing God's peace does not require each worshiper to offer a sign of God's peace to every other worshiper present.

Sharing God's peace is an announcement and enactment of God's grace. Because Jesus is here with us, we give to each other what we are saying: Christ's own peace. After this enacted wholeness, we are better prepared to make our offerings and celebrate his meal.

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This is one of the oldest practices of the Christian Church. One of the earliest Christian documents outside the New Testament contains this description. The Christian community is encouraged to “come together on the Lord's day, having first confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure. Anyone who has a

quarrel with his fellow should not gather with you until he has been reconciled, lest your sacrifice be profaned."

Sharing God's peace became a regular part of the early Christians' practice of Holy Communion. The congregation prays for God's peace in the Church, God's peace in the world, and God's peace for all those in need. Then we offer God's peace to one another. Finally we receive the gift of God's peace in our sharing of Holy Communion.

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This is God's peace, not human tranquility. This peace is possible only through Christ. This takes us from Matthew five to Romans five. Paul reminds us in Romans, chapter five, verses six through eleven.

"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly...God proves [God's] love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us...For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of [God's] Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

Satan wants to divide us to death. Sin is complete separation from God. Sin produces separation from our true selves, from our neighbors and from Creation. The more cut off we are, the less alive we can be. The emptiness we feel is a profound symptom of this division.

In Jesus Christ, you have peace with God. In Jesus Christ you are reconciled with God. That reconciliation breaks down the wall of death that divides us from God. With our hearts made new, we are can live as whole human beings. We are equipped to make our outsides match our insides. That's what wholeness really is.

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We live out that wholeness by being a safe community. That means that we reject physical, verbal and emotional violence in our personal relationships and in our community. This means that we are a community of forgiven sinners, so we support forgiveness as a way of life. This means that we seek collaboration and cooperation rather than conflict with others. This means that we reject any thoughts or behaviors that turn other humans into objects for our pleasure or power or convenience. This means that we say what we mean and we mean what we say—always speaking that truth in love.

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Next week we'll spend some more time on this part of our calling. That calling leads us to share the peace and love of Christ even with our enemies.

We are called to wholeness. Let's pray...

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