

Relationships Matter
Matthew 5:21-26
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel
July 18, 2021

I remember some years ago when on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, also known as the Day of Atonement, I received an email from a rabbi friend of mine. His email began with acknowledgement that it was Yom Kippur, a time to reflect on the previous year, ask forgiveness and grant it. After sharing reflections about the year, much like many of us have been known to do in Christmas letters, he gracefully acknowledged that there were those who had hurt him over the last year and that he was offering forgiveness and ready to begin anew. He then went on to acknowledge that there were also those he had hurt over the past year and humbly asked for their forgiveness. The letter was beautifully written and because I knew him, I trusted it was sincere. But what I was most struck by was the honesty of naming the realities of hurts we do to one another, intentional or not, as well as our need to give and receive forgiveness.

Fast forward about five or six years. I was now living here in Iowa City. At an event one day I was seated at a table with people I did not know. I struck up a conversation with a person who is involved in local politics. While there were many directions our conversation could have gone, where it went was to faith. There I sat as I listened to someone I had just met tell me about the important role corporate worship played in his life and about the most moving moment in worship each Sunday, which for him was when they prayed a prayer of confession. He explained that he needed to participate in that as a reminder that what we do and how we live matters, as a reminder that our lives impact others, as a reminder that he was not alone, and as a reminder that every moment is a chance to ask forgiveness and to move forward differently.

Friends, forgiveness matters.

But too often we don't acknowledge it.

We are better at pretending that everything is okay. We are better at pushing things under the rug. We are better at complaining to someone else about someone we have been hurt by or who we have hurt, rather than having face-to-face conversations about that hurt. We are even better at excusing behaviors that have no excuse in the name of "peace", which when really challenged on it we know is no peace at all. But all of these things seem to come more easily than going directly to another person and seeking or offering forgiveness.

And yet, Jesus reminds us of how important this is.

Here we are in the section of the Gospel of Matthew that we know as the Sermon on the Mount. A crowd has gathered and Jesus is teaching. This chapter begins with the

All contents copyright of the author.

beatitudes and a word about salt and light. Jesus then turns to an affirmation of the law and prophets, a reminder that he is a faithful Jewish person who knew the scriptures and who did not overturn them, but rather continued to both fulfill and explain them.

Our reading opens with a reference to one of the Ten Commandments and moves into a reminder that following the letter of the law is not enough. Rather, in good Jewish tradition, Jesus was “identifying [the law’s] underlying motivation” (Williamson and Allen, *Preaching the Gospels Without Blaming the Jews*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p 20). After all, intention matters in Judaism, it mattered to Jesus, and it matters in our lives.

It is not enough at the end of the day to be able to say, “I did not murder anyone today.” Rather we must learn to acknowledge that any evil act begins with small things inside us that are left to grow. In making this connection Jesus reminded us that the commandments are designed for the health of the community, and that checking things like not murdering or committing adultery or stealing off a to-do list does not guarantee a healthy community. Rather, it is in the details and interactions...it is in the relationships where communities become and remain healthy.

None of this makes forgiveness easy. But it does remind us of how important it is.

And, let’s pay attention to the language of the scripture here. In verses 23 and 24 we hear, “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” (Matthew 5:23-24, NRSV).

Did you notice...while offering forgiveness to others is important, it’s not actually what is being addressed here. Rather, Jesus says, when you remember that someone has something against you, in other words when you remember that you have done something to harm someone else...go, and make things right.

Friends, can you imagine a world where we did this?

Can you imagine a world where parents whose stressful day at work got taken out on their children actually went to those children and acknowledged their wrong, made a commitment to do differently and sought forgiveness?

Can you imagine a world where people in power were willing to name the ways they had used and abused others as they climbed the ladder toward success?

Can you imagine a world where we were willing to confess our corporate sins of greed and selfishness, sins that have led to a history filled with the abuse and enslavement of other people?

Can you imagine a world where each of us was willing to see ourselves clearly enough that we could admit when we had done something wrong and then choose to work to make it right.

Alcoholics Anonymous Anonymous has imagined this world. It shows up in Steps 8 and 9 of the 12 steps. Step 8 says this: Make a list of all persons we had harmed, and become willing to make amends to them all” ([Twelve Steps - Step Eight - \(pp. 77-82\) \(aa.org\)](#)). And Step 9 is: “Make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when doing so would injure them or others” ([Twelve Steps - Step Nine - \(pp. 83-87\) \(aa.org\)](#)).

What if, not because of substance abuse or addiction, but simply as followers of Jesus, we learned to practice this? Can you imagine how that could change the world?

But there’s one other thing to note here. When Jesus talks about doing this, he sets it in the context of the offering. When you are offering your gift...set it down, go and be reconciled...then come back and give it.

Why? What difference does this make?

Perhaps it helps if we remember that giving our offering is about more than giving some cash to help pay the church’s bills...it is about more than a Sunday morning habit or something we enter in bill pay through our online banking. Giving our offering is a reminder that ultimately everything, ourselves included, belongs to God and a commitment to use all of our resources - our money but also our whole lives - on behalf of God’s kin-dom. Offering is a celebration of our relationship with and reliance upon God.

And, remember, our relationship with God has everything to do with our relationship with people.

Friends, honesty is important...confession is important...forgiveness is important...reconciliation is important. And important things are often not easy. But each week as we worship, as we come before God and recommit to living in the ways of Jesus, we are reminded that we will live in our most loving relationship with God when we are loving our neighbors well. May it be so.