

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

2/12/2017

[Deuteronomy 30:15-20](#)[Psalm 119:1-8](#)[1 Corinthians 3:1-9](#)[Matthew 5:21-37](#)**The Undertow**

I'm grateful to our school studio band and choir for being with us this morning. Mrs. Molli Davis and Mr. Steve Thompson do a great job working with our young musicians. The jazz and gospel music they're sharing with us this morning is all river-themed, which got me thinking about the river that flows through the heart of our city. Whenever I look at the Mississippi River I feel awed by it, but also still feel a slight sense of dread. As a kid, when my parents and I would visit New Orleans or Baton Rouge, sometimes I'd get an opportunity to walk down to the river. I remember marveling at how wide it was in some spots—nearly a mile. I also remember marveling at its power despite the calm it seems in some spots to portray on the surface. My parents would never let me walk out into the river, and frankly they made me frightened of it. They told me stories of people they'd known who got caught up in the undertow of the river before they knew what hit them, and who easily drowned. My favorite book as a kid was *Huckleberry Finn*, and I couldn't understand how that character ever swam across the river in the face of what my parents taught me about its danger. I wished, despite my fears that I could float along the river on a raft with Huck and Jim, and swim in the cool waters.

In his book *Rising Tide*, John Barry confirms, nevertheless, my parents' concerns and my childhood fears about the river. "On the Mississippi," he writes, "violent differences in currents can create undertows that pull 100 feet straight down, or

whirlpools as large as 800 feet long and 200 feet across, large enough to swallow trees, flotsam, or boats.”¹ He relates the description of a European visitor from 1837 who wrote, “It is not like most rivers, beautiful to the sight . . . not one that the eye loves to dwell upon as it sweeps along, nor can you wander along its bank, or trust yourself without danger to its stream. It is a furious, rapid, desolating torrent, loaded with alluvial soil Pouring its impetuous waters through wild tracts, it sweeps down whole forests in its course. . . . It is a river of desolation, and instead of reminding you, like other rivers, of an angel which has descended for the benefit of man, you imagine it a devil.”² The river gives so much life to our region. So much good comes from the flow of its waters, but below the surface lurk devilish currents.

As we hear Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount this morning, that image of the river seems apt to me. Four different times Jesus tells the crowd, “You have heard that it was said . . . , but I say to you.” Our traditions, all the things we’ve learned from our parents and ancestors, flow like a river through time, and easily sweep us up into their slow, comforting currents. It’s easy to get stuck in the flow of the river of tradition, floating lazily along, looking only at what we see around us on Sunday mornings, without looking much past the surface. By saying, “You’ve heard that it was said . . . , but I say to you,” Jesus isn’t teaching something new. He is not telling us to throw out what we’ve learned. Jesus is not changing the boundaries or the flow of the river on us in his famous sermon, as much as he’s asking us to look deeper, to go deeper, and to take caution at what may be below a seemingly placid surface.

¹ Barry, John, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America (Kindle Edition)* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), Loc. 3114.

² Barry, Loc. 1624.

Jesus addresses four big issues in this passage: murder, divorce, adultery, and oaths. These may seem like big issues, but what Jesus shows us here is that all of them start below the surface. In terms of the flow of the river we may think these issues will look like white-water rapids, but what brings them about is more like the undertow raging beneath the surface. It's those little hidden currents that can lead to more violent currents that can cause great destruction. In this case, all four of these issues begin with the simple devaluing of others that can lead to the destruction of relationships.

I want us to explore this passage by looking primarily at what Jesus says about murder. Murder is clearly violation of the law, but Jesus asks us to look deeper—even being angry with a brother or sister will bring judgment, he tells us. People commit murder because they've gotten caught up in the undertow of anger. The Anglican theologian John Stott wrote, "If looks could kill, many would kill with a look. If murder can be committed by cutting words, many are guilty. . . . Every loss of temper, every outburst of uncontrolled passion, every stirring of sullen rage, every bitter resentment and thirsting for revenge—all these things are murder. We can kill by malicious gossip. We can kill by studied neglect and cruelty. We can kill by spite and jealousy. We have probably all done so."³

Even something as seemingly simple as devaluing others by name-calling is a kind of murder because it devalues the other person. He's talking here of "terms [that express] a low evaluation of one's fellow human being and a readiness to treat a person as less than human." To call someone a fool. Or a moron. Or worse to use racial epithets. Jesus says "that murder really begins when one loses one's respect for human personality

³ Stott, John R. W., *Basic Christianity* (London: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1958), 67.

and the infinite worth of every individual.”⁴ There’s more going on here than the white-water rapids of murder on the surface, but of the insidious undertow of anger deeper beneath the surface that causes us to lose sight of the dignity of people with whom we are angry.

Jesus goes on to address what is still a great danger: what the Baptist pastor Clarence Jordan called “crying on God’s shoulder” by coming to church with our anger and feeling justified—by withdrawing and “seeking solace in religion.” It’s easy to bring our anger into this space and feel like, “Well, here I am at church. God loves me. I have a right to be angry with that person.” We can easily slip into the flow of the current on the surface, justifying ourselves without really examining our hearts or our place in being people of reconciliation. I use this sentence of scripture often after my announcements and before we do the offering. Have you really listened to it? Jesus says, “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your sister or brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your sister and brother; then come and offer your gift.” It doesn’t say “If you have something against someone” it says “if someone has something against *you*.” It puts the responsibility of reconciliation squarely on our shoulders. Jordan writes, “The worst thing possible would be to escape from facing up to your real situation by crying on God’s shoulder. God’ll have none of it—for your benefit. God wants you to stop thinking you have grounds for being mad at other people; it’s probably the other way around. Take the initiative of getting things put right. You’ll be amazed at how much better you and God will get along. Your offering, as well as your whole religious life, will be a joyous thing.

⁴ Jordan, Clarence, *Sermon on the Mount* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1952), 38.

Incidentally, you won't be as apt to be bothered with high blood pressure and stomach ulcers.”⁵

Anger is a good thing. It's a barometer. It tells us when something's not right. But it can drag us under. Think of our current political climate, and how easily silly political disagreements can put people in a state of downward dragging anger. How looking at others of another political party we can turn them into sub-human malevolent creatures, rather than people just like us made in God's image. It may be the way of the world these days, but is that how Christians are called to treat others? Jesus counsels that such murderous projection seriously imperils our spiritual lives.

Jesus goes on to warn about the undertow of the thoughts that can lead to adultery. Now, Jesus is not talking about normal impulses that are a part of what it means to be human. He's talking about dwelling on those impulses in such a way that we objectify other people. As Martin Luther once said, “I cannot stop the birds from flying around my head, but I can keep them from nesting in my hair.” Indulging those thoughts are a spiritual danger because they cause us to objectify other human beings. This is, once again, about losing sight of the dignity of other people, as well as our own, which imperils relationships. Just as murder begins in the heart, so does adultery.

When Jesus talks about divorce, again, he's not being harsh or legalistic. He's referring to a specific practice of the time. Pastor Jordan explains, “[Some] men fretted at the law against adultery, which chained their appetites. Then the happy thought occurred to them that there was no law against marrying the [ones they objectified]. The problem, though, was what to do with such a wife when you got tired of her and wanted another. Well, in that case you'd have to unmarry her, but in order to keep her reputation clean

⁵ Jordan, 39.

you would give her written evidence that she was no longer married to you. Jesus just bluntly called all this finagling by its proper name—legalized adultery.” Jesus’ concern is much more focused on intent here than on act. This is much different than an absolute prohibition on divorces today, which are always to be lamented, but are sometimes necessary, so we must be cautious about lumping all divorced people into Jesus’ admonition. Marriage is a covenant bond until death. Sometimes that’s the death of a spouse, and sometimes it’s the death of a marriage.

With divorce, with adultery, with murder, with swearing oaths, all of these things come down to the same thing: God’s kingdom calls “not for a change of law, but a change of heart.”⁶ As Jesus says elsewhere, “It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.” For Jesus, it’s less about the *act* and more about the *intention*. It’s less about the letter of the law, and more about the spirit of the law. In other words, it’s not so much what’s sitting on the surface we need to watch out for, it’s the undertow.

What to do? What to do when you love the water, and feel invited to wade into it? Know the risks of your wading, practice your swimming, and know what to do if danger strikes. Do you know what experts advise for people caught in the undertow? Don’t fight it. Relax into it. If you fight it you’ll waste all of your energy and you’re likely to drown. If you relax, the current will pull you along for a bit, but it will eventually spit you back up to the surface. In other words, feelings are not smart—they just are. When we feel the undertow of anger, of lust, of dishonesty, of unfaithfulness, or any other potentially unhealthy feeling pulling us down we can’t waste our energy beating at the water to suppress them. Better to relax, acknowledge our deficient hearts, and to ask God to bring us back to the surface. To acknowledge our angers, our appetites, our dishonesties, our

⁶ Jordan, 33, 35.

unfaithfulnesses, and to ask for God's grace and healing. To ask God to restore us to the gentle flow and safety of the surface, and never to let us forget that despite what we know lurks within our hearts, that God's river is a river of life. And on our journey down that river we are infinitely valued, infinitely loved, and forever bound to God by the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.

WORKS CITED

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