

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ, the one who really loves you, amen.

I wonder if the highly intelligent people who picked the scripture readings for the Revised Common Lectionary realized the irony of today's lessons. I mean here we have Jesus teaching us about adultery, divorce, and murder on the weekend we celebrate Valentine's Day... We're trying our best to think and act in loving ways on the day we set aside to remember Saint Valentine and here comes Jesus talking about insults, anger, and murder... The irony isn't lost on me... The more I thought about it I have to admit maybe it is totally appropriate to raise these issues while we're also in the mood for enhancing all of our relationships.

Jesus teaches with the authority only the Son of God himself could possess. Because Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, He can speak for God as nobody else can. So, when Jesus says you have heard... you shall not murder, but I say even if you are angry with or insult your brother or sister in Christ you are guilty, He speaks with the full authority of God Almighty. Jesus uses his authority not to hand out cheap or even free grace, but instead he expands the common understanding of what it means to commit murder and for that matter what it means to be angry with another person. Anger and insults in God's eyes are just as offensive as the intentional taking of another person's life. It makes me think twice about controlling my temper. The Bible sets out several times when the

taking of another person's life is permissible, even commanded by God.

Especially in the Old Testament... Even Jesus got angry. He was so enraged at the money changers in the Temple he made a whip out of cords and drive them out. He didn't technically take their lives, but in his anger, he killed them none-the-less. Although the term isn't used in the Bible, righteous anger seems to be permissible. Still, all-in-all, we should be very careful unleashing our anger lest we wind up killing someone we didn't really expect to kill and thereby making ourselves subject to Jesus righteous anger.

The more I play with these thoughts concerning anger, the more I realize just how tempting and seductive anger really is. I mean if you actually go out and intentionally murder someone you can only do that one particular murder one time and then it's done. On the other hand, if you kill them with your angry insults you can kill them over and over in your mind, without paying the high price of human judgement. You think and feel like you're getting totally away with murder, in your mind. I think that's why we tend to hold on to anger and grudges for so long. It feels good to murder that person over and over again with our anger.

In ancient days name calling and insults were extremely serious offences. Ancient people put great value on their names and their reputations. If someone insulted you by calling you a name, they took part of your honor and respect. Ancient people living in and around the Holy Lands lived in an honor—shame

culture. A person's monetary wealth only partly accounted for their honor ranking. Their standing in society was of supreme importance and someone publicly insulting you would mean a loss of your honor in the eyes of the community. Today, public name calling, especially in the political arena, is as common as breathing. I wonder what kind of a world we would have if everyone took Jesus seriously that anger and insults are the equivalent of murder... I wonder how our lives together as followers of Jesus would be different if we took Jesus at his word regarding our anger...

Don't beat yourself up too much if you have difficulty with anger issues. We're simply unable to live by these high standards Jesus imposes. That doesn't give us an excuse to not try though. When we fail, and we will fail to keep our anger totally under control, Jesus gives us the remedy. It's called forgiveness and reconciliation. That sounds easy enough. All we have to do is say we're sorry and then both parties pretend like nothing ever happened, right? Jesus says if you're at the altar ready to give your offering and suddenly remember this rift you have with someone in your circle of family and friends, just drop off your offering and go to your adversary. I have to point out how practical Jesus is here. He says leave your offering at the altar. That way if you don't come back for some reason, at least the church did get your offering... Seriously, Jesus' point is, God won't accept your offering if you're withholding forgiveness and or reconciliation.

If it were only that easy... Forgiveness and reconciliation are both very hard things to do. Plus, we gloss over this pretty fast and when we do we don't notice Jesus isn't actually talking about you or your anger issues. He says if you're about to give your offering and remember your brother or sister has something against you. It's not your anger and resentment, but the anger and resentment of your sister or brother in Christ that becomes the obstacle between you and God. You may have long ago completely forgiven that person from your heart, but they still hold animosity toward you. Well, what are we supposed to do about that? Can I really be held accountable for how someone else thinks or feels about me? I'm afraid the answer, as much as I'd like it to be no, is yes. Yes, you and I are held accountable to God by Jesus for what others think and feel about us. That's the reason Jesus says to leave your offering and go to that person to make amends. How else can the Body of Christ remain unified?

When we gather together here on Sunday morning we gather for Worship. We bring our praise and raise our songs to God. We show our thanks for all God's blessings to us by our participation in worship. We bring our offering as both our duty and our joy. Our duty, to help keep this Church fiscally sound, but also our Joy. It's our great joy to be able to give something back for God who has done so much for us. When I give my offering I really want God to know I love Him. It makes me very sad to think that many times my offering wasn't accepted with joy

by God because I wasn't in a right relationship with someone. When the greeters welcome you into the Sanctuary on Sunday morning they do so with the words, "May the peace of the Lord be with you." You are then asked to share that peace with those who you see and greet as you make your way to your seat. Then, just before we take up the offering the Pastor shares the peace with everyone in the congregation. What we're doing is modeling the behavior Jesus commands of us. I'm not naive enough to think we can solve all the issues between people with the simple phrase, "Peace be with you. And also with you." I do think by modeling that forgiving and reconciling behavior we can learn what to do and how to behave that in real life situations.

I hope and pray your Valentine's Day weekend was full of love and flowers and chocolates. But more importantly, may the peace of Christ be with you always. May the reconciliation we have in Christ Jesus be our shining example for reconciling with each other. May you be reconciled with anyone and everyone who is holding on to a grudge from who knows how long ago. Having been reconciled to Christ and to your neighbors, may you find heaven's joys now and forever, amen.