

Betsey Moe  
4.25.10  
“Bottled Anger”

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

25So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. 26Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27and do not make room for the devil. 28Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. 29Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. 30And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. 31Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, 32and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. 5:1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, 2and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Matthew 5:21-24

21“‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. [You know, I need to excuse myself for a minute. I have something I need to take care of. I’ll be back.]

[O.K. Where were we? Verse 23...] So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

*This is the Word of the Lord.*

The other night I was watching a reality TV show, and on this show was a dad who was a yeller. Instead of talking to his kids, he yelled at them, all for the sake, he said, of showing his authority. But he didn’t just raise his voice; underneath the yelling was an edge of anger. Finally, his kids told him how his intimidation tactics were affecting them. He said, surprisingly, on primetime TV that he was a Christian, and that he was going to take his kids’ comments to heart and make an effort to stop yelling so much. If, by chance, being gentler did not work, he reserved the right to start yelling again.

Often, as Christians, we think that following Jesus means that we are supposed to stop certain behaviors – to use will power never to be angry again. And Jesus *does* see anger that leads to insults as a serious sign of sin: “You heard it was said, ‘You shall not kill,’ but I say that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you are liable to judgment.” If we were to stop reading there,

we would assume that Jesus expected us like this man on TV simply to stop yelling – to stop the angry outbursts – to bottle the anger we hold against another until it goes away.

But Jesus doesn't say to stop being angry or hold it inside and deal with it privately; he gives us a more public process to work through our anger – to expose it for what it is and deal with it – so that we can experience true freedom. This process is called reconciliation. In other parts of Matthew, Jesus gives more specific instructions on reconciliation; here, he gives a framework for it, grounding it in worship. Today I want to talk about that framework.

First, reconciliation originates in worship. Jesus says, "When you are offering your gift at the altar, and you remember that your brother or sister has something against you..." Offering gifts at the altar was, in first-century Judaism, *worship*. Jesus assumes that in the act of worship, we *will* remember if a brother or sister has something against us; in the act of worship, we will become aware of our sin. There is something about worship – the rhythms of singing and silence, of praise and confession, of being confronted by God's Word and speaking to God with our words in prayer – that exposes our need for God. Worship at its best is a time of self-examination, a time when walls come down and each of us is willing to look at ourselves and let the Word of God nudge us. Worship is where our private lives collide with God's Word, and God's Word starts to reshape us. For Jesus, worship was the context in which God exposes to us our needs and calls us into a new way of being.

Next, Jesus says, "leave your gift before the altar and go – be reconciled with your brother or sister." I don't think that we're always supposed to take this line literally like I did a few minutes ago, although we all know how difficult it is to concentrate on worship when a fresh conflict is hanging over your head. I do think Jesus was emphasizing the absolute priority of interpersonal reconciliation, of having our relationships in order. In fact, this passage and others in Matthew make it clear that if we cannot forgive a brother or sister, or if we do not acknowledge the interpersonal rifts in our lives that we have caused, we ourselves will not be forgiven, and we worship in vain.

And so, if, in the act of worship, we remember a conflict hanging over us, we are to interrupt our worship to deal with the conflict. The idea of interrupting one duty to take care of another is something the rabbis had discussed in the time before Christ. They had concluded that some duties, particularly those duties directed toward God were "higher" than others. A lesser duty – a duty toward a fellow human being, for example – could be interrupted for the sake of a God-directed duty, but not the other way around. So the rabbis, the teachers of the day, would have said, "First complete your worship to God, then go and be reconciled to your brother."<sup>1</sup> The fact that Jesus reversed the expectation, putting people before God, showed where Jesus' heart was, and is the kind of thing that got him crucified. Being intentional about keeping our human relationships in order – in other words, loving one another – would be the proof of our devotion to God. Worship without regard to human relationships was empty worship. And so perhaps a quick trip to Forza or to the church hallways, even in the middle of worship, may sometimes be in order.

Finally included in this framework of reconciliation is the call to return to worship. "Be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." Jesus doesn't make the

Christian life *all about* human relationships; otherwise, we could simply love and forgive our neighbors, live an upright life, and have no need for God. No, Jesus calls us back to worship; Jesus calls us to enter more deeply into the one relationship (with God) that will continue to make a difference in all of our other (human) relationships. When we return to worship after a humbling, honest conversation with a brother or sister, we cannot help but acknowledge that human reconciliation is only possible by the grace and presence of a reconciling God. Returning to worship also means that we are continually open to God's reshaping, never assuming that we will be able to fix our sinfulness on our own. And so we worship, examine ourselves, go and be reconciled, then return to worship; examine ourselves, go and be reconciled, then return to worship, and so on. We continually depend on God. Our return to worship, where we then freely lay down the gifts of our lives before God, is worship at its fullest.

So, to this man on reality TV, I want to say, "Go ahead and try to stop yelling. Make your best effort not to be angry anymore. But tomorrow, when you start yelling again, try reconciliation – which has the power to transform. Jesus himself showed that there is power in reconciliation and forgiveness – more power, even, than in perfection. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>i</sup> From Matthew, Volume 1, The Christbook by Frederick Dale Bruner (Word Publishing, 1987). P. 179.