

In our Gospel reading we continue to hear from that lengthy moral exhortation we call the Sermon on the Mount. Again, just to put it in context, we are hearing it from St. Matthew's Gospel. One of the things that is distinct about St. Matthew's telling of the Good News, is his very-Jewish perspective. Most scholars agree that Matthew was likely a Jew, telling the Good News to primarily other Jews. We might ask, "*Weren't they Christians?*" They would not have understood the notion of 'Christian', but instead would have regarded themselves as Jews, following the course of their Jewish faith, according to the teachings of a fellow Jew, Jesus Christ.

That's not the case necessarily with the other evangelists. For example, St. Luke was writing primarily to a Gentile audience. They didn't see the world through the lens of Jewish faith and culture, as St. Matthew and his readers did.

And so in Matthew's telling of the Good News we see subtle nuances that reveal this. Parallels to the great moments of the Old Testament and the great Jewish figures of antiquity are easier to see. For example, just as Moses received God's Law on Mt. Sinai, Jesus offers the fulfillment of God's Law up on a mountain. For St. Matthew's audience, receiving this telling of the Good News as Jews, they would have seen the parallel, and that in some sense, Jesus was like a 'new Moses'. But unlike Moses, who only received the Law from God, Jesus had the authority to declare the Law—and thus could be seen as having the authority of God Himself.

We hear him today reference three of the 10 Commandments: the 5<sup>th</sup> (*You shall not kill*); the 6<sup>th</sup> (*You shall not commit adultery*); and the 8<sup>th</sup> (*You shall not bear false oath*). He uses these three to illustrate a point about who he is and his purpose. First of all, he makes it clear: "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill*". In other words, I have come to help you live this beautiful law in a spirit of truth. Rather than this Law being limited to one's words and actions—that is, merely outwardly—I have come that it might be reflected in your whole being—your heart, your mind, your way of seeing.

But regarding the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment, *You shall not kill*, Jesus goes on to speak about anger towards one's brother. Isn't that a curious thing? When did we ever think of brooding anger as killing someone? Those seem like very different things, so what's Jesus trying to say? But even more, in the context of the command to not kill, he uses the Aramaic word 'Raqa' (a term used to insult someone as being empty-headed or a numskull), saying whoever insults his brother will be subject to the consequences of doing so. Again, how is this associated with killing?

Jesus is saying that to live this Law in truth, our anger and insults are a way by which we kill others—not necessarily physically, but spiritually. Remember, Jesus is asking us to consider more than just the outward, but also the interior part of ourselves—body and soul.

I'll tell you one place I see it: in social media. The broad and varied forum where people can throw out the most bombastic and ugly utterances about the most benign things, simply because no one knows who they are and thus they don't have to be accountable for their words. Yes, it's often soul-killing.

And I see it in myself and I observe it in others: how quick we are to anger, to flare up when someone does something that even mildly enters our domain, our sense of order. Think of how other drivers can make us so angry that we're still mad about it when we get to work. Think of how touchy we can be, always ready to call foul.

And on that point, I think of how sometimes we can use our anger to say the most hurtful things, as though that proves to them how offended we are. And so we lash out in the moment, sometimes even telling ourselves that we have no control, that it's just an emotional knee-jerk response. It's nonsense, and nothing of good is gained from it. And regardless of whatever ways we apologize for our words, we can never truly take it back. The damage is done.

And I think of grudges that we hold on to, so often unnecessarily, foolishly believing that we're upholding a principle, proving a point, even believing that we have someone under our thumbs—when in

fact, so often we're making life harder for so many others—friends and family members who are caught in between.

To be clear, there are true causes for anger. For example, there is such a thing as righteous anger. We think of references in the Scriptures that speak of God's anger, such as at the lack of trust given Him by His chosen people. We think of when Jesus overturned the tables of those who were treating God's house as a place for financial profit. This righteous anger is anger one feels when something bad is happening to someone we care about, anger felt for the cause of another.

And sometimes anger is justified, when another person does something that genuinely wounds us or someone we love. While Jesus calls us to reconcile with this feeling, it doesn't mean it happens instantly. I estimate that the degree we are wounded is proportionate to the time that it comes to reconciling with the anger within us. But we must have a desire to move towards that reconciliation.

Sometimes people confess anger. As I say, anger itself is not a sin, unless one of three things are occurring: first, when we are so touchy, like a crab, that we are easily angered without true cause; second, when we retaliate; and third when we have no desire to reconcile with the anger, but instead to hold it, like poison, in our hearts.

Jesus calls us to rise above base human behavior, the lowest common denominator. Our Christian faith calls us to be a reflection of God's love to each other. As God is endlessly patient with us, and looks past our persistent failings, so we need to try to do that with each other. Even if we can't entirely reconcile with another person, for whatever reason, we need to ask for help to reconcile with the anger—the toxin—within us.

Let's recall Jesus' words: *But I say to you, whoever is angry with brother will be liable to judgment.... Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled....*

And Jesus seems to say that this gift, his life, that awaits us at this altar, can't even truly be received, unless we are working at trying to reconcile within. In what way is anger, and the way it's manifested in your language, killing your soul and the souls of others. Ask God for help. Keep asking, day after day. Give it to him. It's only then, that you'll be able to draw life and grace from the gift of this altar.