

WPC
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If At The Altar...
Deut. 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-26

In a recent issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Editor Hershel Shanks tells an interesting story about reconciliation with an old enemy. He and Shuka Dorfman had not spoken in years but recently Shanks contacted him and left a message at his office. “I am going to be 80 years old,” the message said, “and I would like you to give me a birthday present — shake my hand. You don’t have to speak to me, just shake my hand.” Instead, Dorfman phoned him and invited him to visit in Jerusalem for a meal together. “Let’s make shalom, peace,” the voice on the other end said, “I have no hard feelings.”¹

The meal they shared is called *sulkha*, Arabic for “peace dinner.” While dining together they focused on the present and the future and discussed specific ways they could work together. As a result, they came to a new understanding and are communicating again after seven years of deliberate avoidance.

¹ Earl S. Johnson Jr., *Presbyterian Outlook*, Feb. 8, 2011.

Jesus teaches us that acts like this should have top priority for his followers: 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).

It's obvious that Jesus wants to stress the vital importance of human relationships, especially close, primary relationships - brother & sister, mother, father, child, friend. So this part of the Sermon on the Mount is focused on these familiar relationships and puts them in the context of the altar, the place of worship. Last week, we ended with the text, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). Now we're starting to see specific examples of what it means to practice this higher righteousness.

Tom Long notes that what Jesus is saying is, "if you come to worship and remember that someone has something against you, it should become a matter of immediate concern to do whatever is in your power to heal it. Worship depends upon a congregation of worshipers who seek to be reconciled with each other and with their neighbors. Don't wait until it's too late - till tomorrow, till next year, or till kingdom come - to make peace with your brothers and sisters." (Long, 57) Notice that Jesus does NOT say we

should never be angry. He's concerned less with *having* anger than what one *does* with it.

To worship genuinely at church, with our whole hearts, when we know we have done damage to our relationships with others...well, it's difficult, to say the least. That's why I'm always so impressed whenever I witness real reconciliation.

When you're at the altar, and there you remember... Remembering is a primary activity when we're at worship. We remember the stories of Noah and the Ark, of God delivering his people out of Egypt, of the battle between David and Goliath. We remember the life and teachings of Jesus, the whimsical way he turned water into wine at a wedding, his feeding of the 5000 from five loaves and two fish, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. We also remember our own confirmation, the baptism of our children, the weddings and funerals of dear friends. At worship, we remember.

And then, you remember that a brother or sister has something against you. Why does that happen so often at the altar? Fred Craddock says, "Maybe it's the lighting at the altar, it's different. In the dim lamps of this world we compare ourselves with each other and come off looking pretty good. You know God grades on the curve, we'll all pass eventually. And then we come to the altar, and there is that moment of truth when the

thought comes back, it isn't right between us. The brother, the sister, the parent, the child, the friend, has something against me.”

Now that doesn't appear to be an earthshattering thought, does it? Notice, there's nothing in this text about bringing justice to the world. There's nothing here in this particular text that urges us to take up the cause of the widowed and the orphaned, to stamp out gun violence in our schools, to stop drug abuse. It may seem like too small a thing to speak of our relationships with the brother, the sister, the parent, the child. This is the 21st Century, after all. In this age of texting and Facebook, of video games that take us to wondrous new worlds, do we need to actually call or visit or spend time with our parental units, our offspring, our friends?

But there's something about embracing a person and saying, “You know I love you, don't you?” that the best technology can never replace. That's what Jesus is talking about. Let's face it, it's hard to deal with the rest of the world when there's been crankiness around the breakfast table at home. When there is stress there, however minor, it affects me wherever I go and whatever I do. “There's something about primary relationships, if they're sweet and joyful and healthy, I can take on the world.” (Craddock).

That's why I tell couples in premarital counseling sessions, "Look, chances are good that you're going to have a few arguments in your married life. I'd say the odds are somewhere between 150-200%. There are going to be times when each one of you may have to decide: do I want to be right, or do I want to be married?" When a married couple is able to give and take, to forgive, to move on, then they're better able to face life's struggles and challenges individually and together.

If you then are worshipping at the altar, and remember that someone close to you has something against you... Now let me make one thing clear: Jesus is not talking about resuscitating a corpse - there are some relationships that are dead and buried. We need to let those go. In my mind, divorce is never a positive - it's tragic when vows to God and to one's spouse need to be broken. But we all know of situations when, for whatever reason, divorce becomes necessary – physical or mental abuse, for instance. Jesus is not talking about raising dead relationships back to life. He's talking about working on keeping the primary relationships you have healthy.

If you're offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother and sister has something against you, drop your gift, rush out and be reconciled, and then come back and complete your worship. What would it

look like to be reconciled? Fred Craddock's version goes something like this:

And the husband and the wife were arguing at breakfast, ignoring their child sitting in her high chair, busily putting clumps of oatmeal in her hair.

"Our credit card bill is too high. You're going to have to stop going out so much with your friends."

"Hey, I work hard all week, I need to go out."

"You can't keep picking up the tab. We need to save our money for formula and diapers."

"You're always nagging me about my bad habits. You're just as guilty as me. Why don't you give up your membership at the health club?"

"I need that membership! And besides, why am I the one who always gives something up?"

Back and forth they went, until in anger he threw his napkin on his plate, scooted away from the table, slammed the door on his way out, and screeched away in his car. A few minutes later the car returned, they looked at each other, and then they each said, "I'm sorry." And the baby stopped crying, and the three embraced. They had to do that. Do you know how

long that day would have been if he had not come back? I checked it. 742 hours!

And the mother says, “You’re going to be late for school. Come on, hurry up. Where’s your lunchbox?”

“I lost it.”

“What? You lost it? That’s the third one this year, and it’s only December. You had to have the special Harry Potter lunchbox, didn’t you? What’s the matter with you? We can’t afford to keep buying new ones. Well, fine, just go to school without lunch today, I don’t care!

And when the schoolbus arrives to bring the children back home, there at the curb sits a young woman, waiting for the bus, waiting so she can run to the door and embrace a 7 year old boy and say, “I’m sorry.” Why? Because according to the best estimates, that day would have been 820 hours long if she hadn’t.

If you are worshipping at the altar, and there you remember that a brother, a sister, a parent, a child has something against you, drop everything, rush out, and fix it, then come back.

Craddock tells a story of a plane trip he once took. Next to him sat a woman who was crying profusely. He knew it was going to be a long trip.

What should he say? He had to say something, after all, he's a minister; ministers say things in those kinds of situations.

Finally, he said, "This is obviously a sad trip for you."

She said, "Yes." She didn't stop crying. He had not healed her wound.

He said, "I'm very sorry, because it is a beautiful day."

She said, "I'm going to my father's funeral."

He said, "Oh, it's obvious from your crying that you and he were very close."

And she said, "No, on the contrary. I have not written, I have not called, I have not spoken to my father in 17 years. In fact, the last time I was in his home, I slammed out of that house, and as I left his house the last thing I said to my father was, 'Go to hell.' 17 years ago, that was the last thing I said, and now he is dead."

If you find yourself at the altar in Wallingford Presbyterian Church, and suddenly you remember... Please, do what you need to do! "For your own sake; for their sake; for God's sake!" (Craddock) Amen.