

Worship and Reconciliation

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

Matthew 5:21-26 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

²¹ [Jesus taught them, saying,] "You have heard that it was said by those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be subject to the judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother rashly will be subject to the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, "Raca!" will be subject to the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' will be subject to hell fire.

²³ Therefore if you offer your gift on the altar, and there remember that your brother has anything against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Be of good will with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Amen, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny."

Mark 11:22-26 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

²² And Jesus answering says to them, "Have faith of God. ²³ For amen, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be taken up and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will come to pass, he will have whatever he says. ²⁴ Therefore I say to you, all things whatever you ask for, having prayed, believe that you will receive them, and it will be done to you. ²⁵ "And when you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, that your Father in the heavens may forgive you your trespasses. ²⁶ But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in the heavens forgive your trespasses."

Genesis 4:3-7 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

³ And it was at the end of some days and Cain brought a gift offering of the fruit of the ground to Jehovah. ⁴ And Abel he also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And Jehovah looked on Abel and on his gift offering; ⁵ and He did not look on Cain and on his gift offering. And Cain was very angry, and his face fell. ⁶ And Jehovah said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your face fallen? ⁷ If you do well, is there not an uplifting? And if you do not do well, sin crouches at the door; and he longs for you, and you rule over him."

Secrets of Heaven §1150

Outward worship is described as corresponding to inward [worship] when it contains the essential ingredient, which is heartfelt reverence for the Lord. Such reverence is not possible in the least except where charity, or love for one's neighbor, exists. Charity, or love for our neighbor, contains the Lord's presence. With it, we can adore the Lord from the heart. When we have charity, our reverence comes from the Lord, since the Lord gives us all the ability to revere Him and all the vital essence of our veneration. It follows, then, that the kind of charity we have determines the quality of our adoration, that is, the quality of our worship.

The Exhortation Before Holy Supper

- A few weeks ago I was working on a message to the congregation about how to be prepared to take the Holy Supper (brynathynchurch.org/holy-supper-preparation) and one of the things I ran across in my research was an exhortation or warning statement that used to be read before people were offered the Holy Supper in the Anglican Church and also in churches of a number of other denominations.
- When I read it, I was struck by a part about our relationships with other people and I want to read it to you, in the version that is quoted in English in the teachings of the New Church.
 - And if ye shall perceive your offences to be such as are not only against God, but also against your neighbours, then ye shall reconcile yourselves unto them, being ready to make restitution and satisfaction according to the utmost of your powers, for all injuries and wrongs done by you to any other, and being likewise ready to forgive others that have offended you, as ye would have forgiveness of your offences at God's hand: for otherwise the receiving of the Holy Communion doth nothing else but increase your condemnation. (*Life* §5, quoting the 1711 version of *The Book of Common Prayer*)
- This statement, in and of itself, doesn't have divine authority but, as we heard in our lessons, the Lord Himself connects our worship of Him with questions about how we are treating the people around us.
- So it seemed like it could be useful for us to reflect on some of these passages and maybe, every time we come to worship the Lord, we should do more to intentionally take stock of how our relationships are going.

The Connection Between Worship and Our Relationship to Other People

- It is rather appealing to think that we can treat other people badly but then do things that God likes and still have God be happy with us.
- But, right from the beginning of the Word, we can see that is not how the Lord works.
- In chapter four of Genesis, there's the first story of people worshipping God by bringing an offering to Him.
 - Cain brings an offering of the fruit of the ground and his brother Abel brings an offering from his flock.
 - Jehovah accepts Abel's offering but does not accept Cain's offering.
- We might think that the issue has to do with the different things that they brought but Jehovah explains to the furious Cain that, if he does well, then his gift will be accepted.
 - The problem is how Cain has been treating Abel.
 - Jehovah says, "[Abel] longs for you, and you rule over him" (Genesis 4:7).
 - The implication is that, if Cain stopped dominating his brother, Jehovah would accept his gift offering.
- Thousands of years later in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord made the same point again:
 - "[I]f you offer your gift on the altar, and there remember that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24).

- And then about 1700 years after that the Lord made the same point again through Emanuel Swedenborg in the teachings of the New Church.
 - As we read in our lesson, “heartfelt reverence for the Lord.... is not possible in the least except where charity, or love for one’s neighbor, exists” (*Secrets of Heaven* §1150).
 - And in another passage we read, “[T]he Lord cannot be worshiped except from charity” (*Secrets of Heaven* §440).
- Ok. Point taken: if we want to worship the Lord, we need to be thinking about how we’re treating other people.
 - How do we do that?
- As we walk through the doors of the church or get settled into our pews, or kneel down in worship, we should be thinking, “Is there anyone who is upset with me because I hurt them?”
 - And we should also think about it the other way around: “Is there anyone that I am upset with who hurt me?”
 - In another one of our lessons the Lord said, “And when you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone....” (Mark 11:25).
- Let’s talk about how to work on this if we are upset with someone else.
 - And then let’s talk about if someone else is upset with us.

If We Are Upset With Someone Else

- Let’s say that someone has hurt us, what does the Lord want us to do?
 - It’s hard because a lot depends on the situation, right?
 - It matters what all has happened in the relationship.
 - It matters what you’ve already tried.
 - It matters whether you are safe.
 - It matters what the dynamics are in the relationship.
 - *Etc. etc.*
- However, regardless of the details of the situation, we do know that the Lord does always want us to be working on forgiving the other person.
 - That doesn’t mean that we let them keep hurting us.
 - That doesn’t mean that we say that what they’ve done is OK.
 - What it means is that we working on not hating them and not trying to get revenge on them and hurt them back.
 - We might not be clear on what we *should* do but we can be pretty clear on what we should *not* do.
 - As we work hard to not try to hurt people back, the Lord will help us to figure out what to do.
 - And He will help us to find the strength to keep forgiving the other person.

- This is part of why forgiveness is a good thing to work on when we're coming to worship the Lord.
 - Worship can remind us that we don't have to do this on our own.
 - The Lord can help us.
 - When someone has hurt us badly it can weigh down on us like a whole big mountain on our chest.
 - And to try to let go of our bad feelings towards them can feel impossible.
 - But, right before the Lord told people to forgive others when they stand praying He said this:
 - ²³ "[A]men, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will come to pass, he will have whatever he says. ²⁴ Therefore I say to you, all things whatever you ask for, having prayed, believe that you will receive them, and it will be done to you." (Mark 11:23-24)
- It's hard work but the Lord can do it.

If Someone Else is Upset With Us

- Now let's talk about when someone else is upset with us.
- If someone is feeling upset with us, there are all sorts of different reasons why that might be and each situation would need to be handled differently.
 - But, regardless of the situation, the Lord is calling us to aim towards reconciliation.
 - And, whatever interaction we might have with a person about how upset they are with us, it will go better if we have taken the time to go to the Lord about it.
 - If we have breathed and opened our hearts to the Lord and asked Him to help us see where we might have gone wrong.
 - Along these lines, let's talk about the deeper meaning of the word "brother" in scripture.

The Deeper Meaning of "Brother"

- At a deeper level, the teachings of the New Church tell us that a "brother" in the Lord's Word signifies charity or genuine love for the neighbor.
 - This brings a different significance to what it means to be angry with our brother rashly or without cause.
 - Are you angry with charity?
 - Do you know what you need to do but you're angry with the idea of having to do it?
 - Are we calling charity "You fool" or "Raca" which means empty or worthless?
 - Are we treating charity as if it's stupid, naive, and worthless?
 - If we are, then we are heading for trouble – judgment, hell fire.
- Part of our work is to keep believing in loving our neighbor and treating them fairly and charitably.
 - And paying attention if, when we bring our gift to the altar, charity has something against us.
 - If we come to church and our conscience is making us feel uncomfortable because of how we treated someone this past week, well then we've got some work to do.

- Conflict with other people is often messy and confusing and it can be hard to know how to respond when someone else is upset with us and the reasons they are upset are not all entirely valid in our own minds.
 - This is a place where doing the work with the Lord to examine our behavior in light of what the Lord says about charity can help us to feel less defensive and more willing to acknowledge our faults to other people.
 - Along these lines, the teachings of the New Church tell us that, at a deeper level, "To be 'reconciled to one's brother' is to shun enmity, hatred, and revenge... as sin.... (*Life* §73).
 - We can do that work to shun hatred and revenge and be reconciled with a charitable approach to other people before we actually interact with the person themselves.
 - We can pray to the Lord using the words from the Psalms,
 - Search me, O God, and know my heart;
 - Try me, and know my anxieties;
 - And see if there is any wicked way in me,
 - And lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23-24, NKJV)
- If we've done that kind of work in advance, it will help our interactions with the person go better when we do come to actually interact with them.

Imagine a World Where People Did This

- In many ways it's a very simple, obvious message for today: when you come to worship the Lord remember that the Lord wants you to be working on your relationships with other people.
 - It's simple to understand and can be really hard to do.
 - It is really hard to have been hurt by people.
 - It can be hard to forgive them when there is a big part of us that does not want to forgive them.
 - And it is really hard to have hurt other people – intentionally or unintentionally.
 - Either way it is really hard to not get defensive.
- There seem to be seasons with this kind of work.
 - Seasons of dealing with a lot of interpersonal conflict and angst and seasons with less of that.
 - If you're going through a hard season of conflict and working towards forgiveness and reconciliation but you're not there yet and you're not sure that you're ever going to get there, know that the Lord is with you and "with God all things are possible."
- And, in addition to thinking about how hard this work is, let's also think about what a difference this work can make.
 - Imagine if each week when people went to church, each person prayed about their relationships with other people and each person got help from the Lord and just softened a bit towards other people because of it.
 - And then, in the week following each Sunday people would be just a little bit more gentle with each other, a little bit less defensive, a little bit more ready to forgive and connect.
 - That sounds like a world worth working towards.
 - And even just within your own world and weekly routine it's a world worth working towards.

- Even if it's just you allowing the Lord to soften you a little bit each week, rescue you from the hell fire of hatred, and move you towards the miracle of charity and reconciliation, that's also a world worth working towards.

Stand Praying

- To practice actually doing this work, in a minute we're all going to stand up and pray silently.
 - The Lord said, "And when you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone...."
 - Standing is a different posture than kneeling.
 - Kneeling is a posture of humility.
 - Standing is a posture of being present and ready to listen and take action, like an angel standing in the presence of God, ready to do whatever the Lord tells them to do (*Apocalypse Revealed* §366).
 - We're going to think about the people in our lives.
 - Think of someone you had a fight with.
 - Or someone you were annoyed with this week.
 - Or someone you yelled at or who yelled at you.
 - Someone you might complain about to someone else.
 - Someone who has been critical of you.
 - And then pray for that person.
 - And pray that the Lord help you to be loving and forgiving.
 - And pray for reconciliation.
 - Or just pray for clarity about what you should do and not do or say and not say when you're next with them.
 - And if you can't think of anyone who is upset with you or who you've been upset with, then you can just try to think of all the people that you love and thank the Lord for them.
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- Please stand up.
 - Let us pray.
 - Amen.

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.