

Epiphany 6A - February 16, 2020

“Broken Intimacies and Misdirected Desires” - © Rev. Seth Jones

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37

Jesus takes a hard turn in the Sermon on the Mount this week. We have gone from affirmation and soaring visions of what it means to be human and in relationship with God and Jesus to an accounting of what is required of us, complete with visceral and disturbing images of plucked eyeballs and cut off hands and the presence of evil in our souls.

When we hear things like what we hear today, it is important to remember that we are hearing the words of someone who has a very deep, intimate relationship with God. And that person, Jesus, also has a very deep, intimate relationship with his followers. When I say *intimacy*, I mean that kind of deep, affectionate, caring, loving relationship that reaches far into the body and into the soul. Intimacy is, as my teacher Dr. Len Sweet calls it, a *womb word*. It is a word that evokes the protective body and actions of a loving mother, which is part of why Jesus has a difficult time with the authorities of the day and with those who uphold the power structures of the day. Jesus does not act like a man when he is with his disciples. He acts like his Mother, Mary. He enacts the motherly affection of her intimate love for her children.

When intimacy breaks, everything around us begins to reflect that brokenness, because intimacy is one of our deepest and earliest experiences as a human being. Even before we are born, we have a profound experience of what intimacy means. Intimacy is more than a feeling; it is more than an experience; it is even more than a state of being. Intimacy, when present, enfolds and holds and carries and supports us, just as God enfolds, holds, carries, and supports us.

And so, today, we hear of the consequences when intimacy breaks. Jesus is echoing what God told Adam and Eve way back in Genesis 3. There, when it became clear that Adam and Eve had violated the Prime Directive of the Garden of Eden, God sits them down and tells them what has happened as a result of that violation. Genesis 3 is often called “The Curse”. I like to think of it, instead, as “The Disclosure of Consequences, The Entrance of Cause and Effect”. Genesis 3 is more a descriptive statement, not a curse by God.

Let’s hear some of Genesis 3:

God says first to the serpent,

*“Because you have done this,
cursed are you among all animals*

*and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life...
I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;*

*To the woman he said,
'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.'*

*And to the man he said,...
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.'*

When we hear this as describing broken intimacy, it sounds very different from the language of a curse, doesn't it? The first part of our broken intimacy is regarding the earth. Our intimate relationship with the earth is broken, and thus the earth with itself. This past week, another massive ice shelf broke off the Arctic Ice Sheet. As that cold water spreads into the ocean, the already weakened ocean currents slow down even more. This creates chaos in other parts of the ocean. If you wonder why the South got so much rain last week, or why the hurricanes are so much bigger and further north than they have ever been, wonder about our broken intimate relationship with the earth and the melting ice caps.

Our intimate relationships are also broken, which is what the second part of these verses are all about. Broken personal relationships resonate in our bodies and experiences that were once joyful, like childbirth, now become filled with pain and anguish. Our relationships with one another, especially our partners in our walk of life, become relationships of power, which is a sure sign of broken intimacy.

And our intimate relationship with ourselves and God are shattered as well. The third part of these verses reflect this brokenness with our calling and our work. The pathways

to an easy flow of the work we do with and for God become burdens and hidden by the weight of working for our survival. It is as if our work, as much as ourselves, becomes dust, even as the sweat drips from our brow.

Genesis 3 is a good foundation for understanding what sin does - sin breaks intimate relationships with the world, with one another, and with our work with and for others. Sin breaks our intimate relationship with God.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount today echoes Genesis 3 and focuses on Anger, Lust, and Malice, each qualities of the mind and soul which have the power to break and destroy intimacy.

Jesus begins all his statements in this section with a formula. *"You have heard it said...But I tell you..."* He is backing up the rationale for these ... what shall we call them? Rules? Descriptive statements about brokenness? Consequences? ... to an earlier point. You are thinking out here, but you need to be thinking inside here, is what he is saying.

Imagine that our actions are at the rim of a large bicycle wheel. Jesus is telling us we need to back up to the spokes and deal with the feelings and ideas that lead to the action, especially anger and lust. But even that isn't enough. We need to back up to the thoughts that led to the feelings and ideas, which led to the actions.

Our Buddhist brothers and sisters would go even further, and I think Jesus would agree with them. They say even confronting the thoughts that lead to the feelings and ideas which lead to actions isn't enough. We must get underneath whatever comes before the thought itself and end the process there. Once we get there, we are not just at the hub of the wheel. We are beyond the hub, beyond the ball bearings that allow our thoughts to spin smoothly. We are beyond the axle that allows the wheel to rotate. We are down to the level where we can confront our deepest commitments, the things we barely know about ourselves.

Murder is backed up to the feeling and expression of Anger. *"You have heard it said, do not murder. But I tell you, if you are angry with anyone, you are already liable."* Murder is an action way out on the edge of the wheel. We need to follow the spokes of the wheel back to the anger that leads to murder.

Anger is experience and feeling of the inconsistency and disconnection that happens when my ideas or desires don't match yours.

And where are you angry now? Jesus asks us. Fix that. Because anger becomes an endless loop, and you will end up in courts and ask judges to enact the anger for you. You will

become broke financially, which is really an energetic reflection of how our anger has broken all our intimate relationships.

Adultery is backed up to the feeling and expression of Lust. *“You have heard it said, do not commit adultery. But I tell you, if you even look with Lust at another woman, you have already done the act.”* Like murder, adultery is the action already way out at the edge of the wheel. You have to follow the spoke back to the lust that leads to adultery.

Lust is the experience and feeling of being driven by our attachment to feelings for another person.

Get control of yourself by whatever means necessary, Jesus says, even if it means cutting off your hand or plucking out your eye. I don't think he is being literal here, but it is a call to a rigorous self-reflection and engagement with all the places our relationships with one another and with our bodies have broken down and we are trying to get others to fix that brokenness for us, rather than turning to the Lord.

Lust is tied in with the act of divorce, as it was understood in the ancient world. Divorce was virtually always enacted by the man against the woman. Divorce was often the legal enacting of the desires of Lust at the expense of a human being. To lose the support and family connections of the husband's family in the ancient world was essentially a death sentence to the woman. Most divorces were enacted so that the man could marry a younger woman, or a more powerful family connection. The person who suffered in all this was always the woman. So Jesus is making a revolutionary, completely unheard of, call to protect the women of the day.

Let's stop here for a moment and reflect. Lust, like anger, is a deep and embodied experience. None of us get off the planet without experiencing lust and anger. Intimacy requires a direct confrontation of all the things that would break intimacy. That direct confrontation requires a deep willingness to self-reflect, to take the time to confront what within us and in our past motivates us to break our intimate connections with the earth, with one another, and with our work.

Prayer, of course, is our friend here. But not just the prayers of listing friends and family, or the prayers of asking for what we need. Instead, we are talking about deep, contemplative prayer that calls forth, at once, the presence of the Holy Spirit within us and also those things that resist the intimate call of the Holy Spirit. Prayer is the arena of confrontation between the self and the ways we break intimacy with God, the world, and the self, and others.

Lust and anger have within them, finally, a desire to connect and be in relationship with others. They are distortions of the desire for intimacy. We feel lust and anger when our desire is distorted by circumstance, personal history, and poor thinking. Most often, lust and anger are like sparks igniting gasoline spilled on the road. They are primal and deep and more noticed than controlled in our daily lives. They ignite when we least expect them to.

Malice, though, is a creation of the personal will. Malice is not concerned about relationships. *Malice is concerned about being greater than other people, being better than other people. Malice desires power.* Malice acts out of the willful need to make more of myself, regardless of who is with and around me. Malice does not want relationship. Malice deliberately deconstructs and disconnects us from each other by undermining our commitments and promises. Malice plays on trust in order to betray.

Both Genesis 3 and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount are grounded in promises made by God with and for us. Some of the promises we make with one another are designed to limit the worst of ourselves. We enter into business contracts to prevent the perceived likelihood that you won't pay for the services I give. We make promises in other avenues to circumvent actions that may cause harm. Some of the promises we make build up the best of ourselves. Wedding vows arise out of these promises. The promises that God makes with and to God's people are always for their betterment and their expansion and growth into the people they were truly meant to be, in God's eyes.

Our promises to one another, whether they are the deepest vows of marriage or a simple promise to pay someone back next week, are an expectation of trust in a relationship. In the ancient world, a promise made between business associates or even families before a marriage were freighted with the oversight of the gods. This is why Jesus says, "*Don't even swear to anything*", because to do so meant swearing allegiance to another god. It is an act of idolatry. The promise becomes an act of power over others, which is the essence of malice. Swearing oaths to other gods breaks intimacy with God, and God is the sovereign one who oversees all promises. So don't compromise yourself, Jesus says, by committing idolatry for the sake of culture or business breaks intimacy.

We truly become who we were meant to be when we know ourselves to be children of God, intimately loved and held. God has given us lampposts and guardrails and street signs along the way to help us become who we were meant to be.

Moses says to the Hebrew people before they prepare to enter the Promised Land:

⁵*See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.*

All this would be easy if we didn't have a road littered with broken relationships, broken promises, broken dreams behind us. Broken intimacies. All this would be easy if our intimate connection to God and Christ had never been shattered and broken. Jesus knows how difficult this life is for us. Jesus knows what it means to live with broken intimacies, places where Anger and Lust and even Malice light everything on fire.

Moses says today,

¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you do not hear... you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live

Jesus speaks to where we have already turned away, where we have already acted on those broken and distorted intimacies, way out at the rim of the wheel. Today, let's say "No" to those places where we continue to turn our hearts away toward the false gods of Anger, Lust, and Malice. Step off the wheel of suffering, which spins one broken intimacy to another. Let us do the hard work of self-reflection so we can stop the impulse that leads to the thought that leads to the feeling and idea that leads to the action. Let us listen to the great prophet Moses and choose Life, which for us means for us to choose Jesus, the Water of Life, and let us say "Yes" to the life God wishes each of us to have, this day, and all the days of our lives.

Amen.