

## “Getting Beneath the Anger”

Matthew 5:21-37  
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Sometimes I think of Jesus as the village psychiatrist or the village therapist. He is passionate about mental health as well as physical health and spiritual health. His concern is for the whole person and for the whole community.

Apparently, he lived at a time not so different from our own time, in that he was aware of a lot of anger. He meets a lot of angry people. And he sees that people haven't found constructive ways to express their anger. He invites them to deal with their anger before they kill somebody. 'You've heard it said, "Do not murder,' but I say to you, "deal with your anger!"

This morning, I want to take us beneath anger, for what I see is that anger is an emotion that's right on the surface. To deal with anger, we need to go deeper; we need to look at what's at anger's source. In all my forty-two years of pastoral work, what I see beneath anger is what I will call un-grieved losses. We all experience loss nearly every day. Some are traumatic; some seem trivial. But I have come to understand that every loss needs to be grieved; needs to be honored. Sometimes this requires a ritual; sometimes not. But, it's when we leave our losses un-grieved that we give birth to anger and to rage.

Sometimes a person loses self-esteem or loses a job or loses a prized fingernail or loses a place in the starting lineup or loses their youthfulness or loses a marriage or loses a tooth! We all grieve differently; but we all need to grieve enough.

In 1980, when I was getting ready to leave my first parish in western South Dakota, no one told me it would be a good idea to say 'good bye.' No one told me that I'd be experiencing a loss. No one pointed out that I had been loving about 500 people who I would surely miss. No one suggested it would be good for my mental health to spend a little extra time telling Nathan Little Wounded what he had meant to me, or telling Henry Good Bear how much I valued his counsel, or letting Melissa Annis know I would treasure her stories.

Off I went to Wisconsin. Day by day, little things would irritate me. Little things would provoke my anger. I'd fly off the handle for no good reason. This went on for months. Finally, the day came for my installation in the Lancaster Congregational Church as pastor and teacher. I invited my colleague, Jack Brooks, from Aberdeen, South Dakota to come and preach the sermon. Half way through his delivery, he said, "One thing you may not know about Dick: he is grieving. He is grieving the loss of 500 people he loved." I don't remember anything else Jack said because I was awash in tears. He had just named what lay beneath my anger. He had named my un-grieved loss. And that was like an Easter Day for me! The following day, I wrote notes to Melissa Annis and to Henry Good Bear and to Nathan Little Wounded and to a lot of other people, telling them what they had meant to me. After that, I was a different person!

Jesus is so wise to teach, "You have heard it said: 'Do not commit murder,' but I say, 'deal with your anger.'"

Two summers ago, the Wisconsin grandchildren came for a visit. Nine year old, Nina, asked me to take them to New York City. We took the train from New Haven. Then took the subway to Battery Park where we caught the Staten Island ferry which, of course, is free and passes close by the Statue of Liberty. Soon after that, we were standing at Ground Zero.

We walked slowly around the reflection pools. We began to read each name of each person who died that day. I began to reflect to myself on how New York City had grieved; how each funeral mattered; how the sound of bagpipes reminded us all that each one's death diminishes us; how the loss of basic security was so astonishing, how the enormity of the loss could never be measured. Then we came to the name I was hoping to find: Thomas F. Theurkauf, Jr. His name brought the grief home to Glastonbury. My parents and his parents were best friends. I consider his sister, Barbara, a soul sister. I turned and looked all around me, and I realized this New York City had grieved well; this City had let its tears flow; this City had honored its fallen heroes. Surely, there is still anger there in Lower Manhattan, still tears to shed; but there is also a kind of resurrection spirit, a sense of life renewed, a readiness to embrace life once again.

My guess is that Jesus suffered lots of losses in his 33 year life span. He got angry now and then. It angered him that money changers set up shop in the temple. It angered him that his disciples argued among themselves over which of them was the greatest. It angered him that those who arrested him did so at night, in secret, rather than in the light of day. He was acquainted with anger and with the power of anger. He was acquainted with the temptation to lash out at those who angered him. Indeed, he cracked a whip at the money changers. But, we also see that he grieved his losses. He wept when his friend, Lazarus, died. He wept when Judas betrayed him. He wept when, from the cross, he beheld his mother. Thus, when he drew his last breath, there was no anger within him.

Often, I'll read in the paper or hear through the grape vine that a judge has sentenced someone to anger management. I think to myself: 'well, that's fine. Maybe they'll learn to count to ten or to hit a punching bag or to swim 100 laps in the pool.'

But what I long for is for this man or this woman or this youth to name and to weep their losses; to name and to grieve their losses, no matter how traumatic, no matter how trivial. For it is in the grieving of our losses that we find the kind of wholeness Jesus imagined for us. “You have heard it said, ‘Do not commit murder,’ but I say, ‘deal with your anger.’”

I offer this reflection on the Matthew text in the greatest of hope!  
Amen.