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"FROM WHOM NO SECRETS ARE HID"

Throughout his gospel, Matthew says that Jesus has come not to repudiate the law (Torah) but to fulfill it. He wants the Jewish-Christians in his community to see Jesus as continuous with ancient Hebrew tradition. For Mathew, Jesus is the new and improved Moses who, as we recall, brought the commandments down from Mt. Sinai to the people below.

Yet Jesus goes way beyond what is required by the Torah and offers a new way that transcends it. His teaching is not concerned with the letter of the law so much as what goes on in the human heart. The challenging admonitions in today's gospel speak to *not* hurting others. Do no harm. Cause no damage or wounds to human beings, including yourself.

What he teaches is not ethics but inner transformation. The Torah was and is good. But now he is revealing something new.

The old law dictates, "You shall not murder." This generally meant you should not murder anyone in your tribe or family, but put no restriction on the killing of Gentiles or enemies. Jesus then teaches about the kind of "murder" that goes on in our minds and emotions. Just *feeling* angry with a brother or sister is a form of aggression that leads to judgment. So ... there is a real problem if I am angry at my biological brother or the sister in community, such as church or any other kind of organization. Even if the anger is bottled up for a time and is not acted upon, the hostile feelings still constitute a peril. Negativity repressed pops out somewhere, sometime. If I am angry at X, I let Y have it. "Kicking the dog." Jesus prods us to give up not only acts of revenge but even the *desire* for retaliation. There is a choice to make. He sets a high bar but offers forgiveness when we fall.

Each escalated violation of the old law leads to a harsher consequence. In the first case, Jesus talks only about *feeling* angry at someone. But if one puts that anger into words and insults a brother or sister then the offender must appear before a "council". A council is called because harming a member of the community hurts the whole community. We know this to be true. For example, if someone cuts him/herself off from father or mother, the whole family aches with the wound. Sin and brokenness do not exist in a vacuum. Divorce, betrayal, adultery, suicide, stealing, slandering or swearing falsely against another can leave lasting damage not only to individuals but to the whole family system. As Paul describes it, the body of Christ aches when one of its members is in pain. Such wounds are often passed along from one generation to the next *unless* intentional efforts towards reconciliation or healing take place. Considerable exertion is often required for rapprochement. There is a turning point, perhaps a crisis or cross-roads, and there is a choice to be made, an opportunity to be seized. The writer of *Ecclesiasticus* says, "To act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given."

An aggressive feeling can lead to an insult, and an insult can lead to calling someone a "fool". Jesus teaches, "If you say, 'you fool', you will be liable to the hell of

fire." Though not physical or tangible we know how words can maim and even kill the human spirit. The ancient Jews had the same word, *dabar*, for *word and action*. They understood that a verbal insult may have physical force. Verbal abuse or cruelty is not acceptable and is to be judged as an action. Several recent suicides of young students who were tormented by their peers are painful reminders of how life-threatening gossip and slander can be. A friend of mine told me how something his mother said to a friend of hers in front of him, when he was only 5 years old, psychologically devastated him, and he bears the wound to this day.

On the other hand, we know that words of love and encouragement are also very powerful. In his letter to the Christian community in Corinth, Paul expresses concern about their disputes, jealousy and quarreling. He says that they "are behaving according to human inclinations." The phrase, "solid food", indicates mature spirituality. The quarreling and factionalism amongst the Christians in Corinth show that they aren't there yet. They need to grow up, leaving behind the milk that spiritual infants drink and move on to a mature faith that gives them something to really chew on. The new thing that Jesus offers in the Sermon on the Mount is such spiritual solid food.

After admonishing them, Paul offers words of love and encouragement, "For we are God's servants working together; you are God's field, God's building."

Henri Nouwen has this to say about the power of words.

"Still, the word has the power to create. When God speaks, God creates. When God says, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3), light *is*. God speaks light. For God, speaking and creating are the same. It is this creative power of the word we need to reclaim. What we say is very important. When we say, "I hate you," we can destroy another person. When we say, "I love you," and say it from the heart, we can give another person new life, new hope, new courage."

I think Jesus wants us to confront anger and hostility on the inside before it comes out in words or actions. Anger repressed becomes a burden to its holder as well as a menace to others. It takes little courage to hold onto familiar neuroses and hurts. Conversely, changing ourselves for love and with love means taking risks. William Sloan Coffin, Jr. said, "courage is the virtue that makes all other virtues possible." Change, even small increments, takes courage.

Like other liberation movements before, the recent events in Egypt have revealed the power of courageous love to create something new even in the midst of uncertainty and instability. The old ways were familiar and stable but also toxic. There are no guarantees about what comes next but the human heart has spoken echoing God's ancient command to "Let my people go."

Up to this point, I have tried to describe the wise counsel Jesus gives on how to avoid hurting others. Yet, he also understands that in reality we will harm each other from time to time. So he tells us then what to do after our aggression hurts someone else. We have acted out our angry feelings, now what do we do?
"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."

Jesus' stunning instruction reverses our usual way of thinking of ourselves as victims of others, victims craving vindication or victory, who would rather be right than reconciled. Our tendency is to believe that someone else did us wrong and they should come to us. But Jesus says think about someone who has a grievance with you for a hurt *you* caused. Then go and seek forgiveness.

Jesus brings medicine right to the center of the human heart where healing and reconciliation have to begin. I am not wild about the fact that Jesus knows all about me. With his laparoscopic gaze he can penetrate my best defenses and enter into my innermost self, challenging the deprecations I impose upon myself. Who is he to tell me I am good and loveable when I know differently? Who wants to have someone around who can see me better than I can see myself? Who is he to love me? Who am I to turn down his love? Who are you to turn it down?

His answer might be, "You are my beloved brother/sister, there is nothing that you deem unworthy about yourself that cannot be loved back into life and into community. I do not enter your heart to dominate or conquer but to liberate and heal. Of course, I cannot do this against your will. You have a choice to live or not. But I will always walk with you, in your sorrows I will walk with you, in your blindness and confusion I will walk with you; "all along your pilgrim journey" I will walk with you now and always … until we arrive home … I will walk with you."

Matthew 5

[21]"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' [22]But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. [23]So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, [24]leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.