

May the words of my mouth, the thoughts of my mind and the meditations of all our hearts always be acceptable in your sight O God.

Well Lorraine certainly knows which weeks to take off work; when I read the bible passages set down for today my reaction was "Oh no how can I get out of this?" but the reality is that as Christians there will always be challenges for us to face and work through and it looks like today is one of those days for me.

The Bible, from the First Testament right through to the book of Revelation, says over and over again, in so many ways, "choose life."

From our reading in (Deuteronomy 30) we hear, "Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live." From Matthew's collection of sayings that we call the Sermon the Mount, we hear Jesus instructing his followers to choose life-giving ways to live together in community. He takes the early commandments about community life and pushes even harder toward reconciliation, peacemaking, honesty. His words fall harsh on our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears but I think he is really offering another version of "choose life."

Have you ever noticed that anger can cause us to do some dumb things? Several years ago a man wrote to Reader's Digest to tell about a memorable argument he had with his wife. The argument was well under way as they left a party one evening. Once they were in the car, words were flying. The area they were driving through was not the safest, so they stopped arguing just long enough to lock the doors. Then they started again.

His wife had really worked up a storm, and after a few choice words from him, she shouted, "Stop the car and let me out!"

The man pulled over to the curb. His wife unlocked the door and got out, but then looked around and got back in again. Looking a little sheepish she said, "Take me to a better neighbourhood."

They both cracked up laughing " and the argument came to a close. Anger **can** cause us to do some dumb things.

Jesus is teaching us a new way to live, to choose life. He says, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not kill,' and 'whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment."

Notice, first of all, that Jesus seeks to deal not with the outer act or behaviour emerging from the anger, but with the inner emotion itself. Everyone gets angry and anger is a **normal emotion**. When we are upset with someone, the best thing to do is to go to that person and let them know what has caused you to get angry. That can be a difficult thing to do. So often we hold our angry feelings inside. We nurse those feelings of bitterness and resentment. Like a terrible beast within, such feelings of resentment, if unresolved, can eat away for years at our very heart and soul.

Many years ago when I was working in this parish I was sent to a John Wimber seminar and I have never forgotten one of the stories he shared.

One night, after a very successful healing seminar, where many healings had been witnessed, he was walking to his car and noticed a man getting his wife out of a wheelchair into their car. He went up to them and asked if they had been to his seminar. They said they had and the husband then went off to put the wheelchair in the boot, so Wimber said to the wife, "did you not come forward for healing prayer?" She replied that she hadn't and so he offered to pray right there and then that she might be healed. And do you know what her response

was? "No thank you. I have spent all of my married life fetching and carrying for him. Now its his turn to do the same for me."

Allowing feelings of bitterness and hatred to fester in our lives will eventually cripple us, or even destroy us. Jesus wants us to conquer not only the outer act, but also the inner emotion and choose life.

We also need to note that unresolved anger is a spiritual issue. There is a sense of urgency in Jesus' words. When relationships are strained, **whether it's our fault or not**, we are to go at once and try our best to reconcile. The sooner we are able to resolve our differences with other people the better the chance is for complete reconciliation. The longer we wait the harder reconciliation becomes.

We were created for relationship. Broken relationships tear at the very reason behind our existence.

"So when you are offering your gift at the altar," Jesus said, "if you remember that a 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."

The relationships we have with each other are that important. Our relationships with each other mirror our relationship with God. In fact Jesus is saying that reconciliation with our brother or sister in Christ needs to have precedence over our worship of God. We need to do the one before we can do the other. How can we expect God to forgive us when we hold grudges and are unwilling to reconcile with someone who has wronged us in some way? Jesus says to us, "Come to terms quickly with your accuser."

I love the words in the Methodist Communion Service at the passing of the peace:

"We, many as we are, are one body in Christ. If we do not love our brothers and sisters whom we have seen, how can we love God whom we have not seen?" That is the message of the cross. The horizontal of the cross represents our relationships with one another and the vertical our relationship with God. We need to achieve both otherwise there is no cross.

Many people today struggle with forgiveness, and yet we cannot choose life and become the people Jesus intends us to become until we are able to forgive the wrongs of others and seek reconciliation.

The goal, then, is for us to love other people in the same way that God loves us. A woman walking past a playground noticed two children were having an argument. They were quarrelling over some insignificant things. "You're stupid!" one said to the other. "Well, so are you!" the other replied. "Not as stupid as you!" the first one said. "Oh, yeah?" the other one said. "That's what you think."

When the woman returned not more than ten minutes later, these two children were playing together again, having forgotten the whole thing. "No brooding, no wounded egos, no blame, no dredging up the past, no recriminations," he writes. There it was, a brief and honest exchange of angry feelings, an even briefer cooling off period, and all was forgiven.

Children are certainly much more forgiving than adults. Somewhere in the process of growing up we seem to have become experts at holding grudges, cradling fragile egos and unforgiving natures.

There is something beautiful about the mending of a relationship once broken. It happens from time to time. Brothers who had vowed eternal enmity. Sisters who had long ago ceased to converse. Then something happens and that which was broken is restored. Perhaps it is beautiful because it reminds us of our relationship with God. Once that was broken, but because of God's great love for us, God took the initiative and reached across the great divide to bring us back to Godself. And that is what God wishes for each of us to do.

On their first day of university, Marsha and Michael met. They liked each other immediately. They learned that they came from neighbouring towns, and they were only weeks apart in age. They had much in common, both played instruments in their high school bands. Their families had friends in common.

As they began to date they discovered that they both had grandfathers who worked in the same office building. One was an accountant; the other was an insurance man. The two grandfathers were both in their seventies.

When the two grandfathers were young boys they had gone to school together. They had been good friends all during their childhoods. Way back in the 1960s, though, they had a huge disagreement. It was over a business matter. They were furious with each other and they stopped speaking entirely for over fifty years. When they would be in the elevator with other business persons, they would talk to the others, but never to each other. They would not even look at each other. If they happened to find themselves with just the two of them in the elevator, the two boyhood friends would ride upstairs in total silence. Fifty years of this.

Meanwhile, the romance of Marsha and Michael was growing more and more serious and they became engaged.

As the grandfathers were riding upstairs in the elevator, one of them remarked casually, "Well, it looks like the kids are going to get married." The other one said, "Yes, it looks that way." The silence of fifty years had been broken.

The engagement party was the first time they had been at a social occasion together in over fifty years. They were sitting next to each other all through the party. They were talking about their days in school back when they were boys. It was as if no time had passed at all. Their friendship seemed to grow immediately. Both had forgotten what that original argument had been about. It was a business argument, but neither one of them remembered the details. Marsha and Michael were married; The grandfathers were restored to being the best of friends.

Marsha kept thinking that she and her new husband had changed history in a way, not prominent, worldwide history but by meeting and falling in love, they had changed the personal histories of their two grandfathers and somehow that seemed very important to her.

Sometimes it happens that way with a fairy tale ending. But think about what had been lost during those fifty years? And it just wasn't the grandfathers who had suffered. Both families would have been caught up in the unhealthy dynamics that ensued.

Reconciliation is hard work. Reconciliation cost Jesus his life. Surely you and I can seek to be reconciled with those who have done us wrong. But someone has to take the initiative, just as God took the initiative with us.

After all, Jesus' project is God's dream: God's dream for the thriving, well-being, shalom of all people. That dream bears the possibility of becoming reality only when we learn to live in relationship and when we turn from the idolatry of individualism to the care for the common good. Choose life!