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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
2/12/2017, The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany  
Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Matthew 5:21-37

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We have mysteries before us today. We have the mystery of the human heart – of what it is capable of *feeling* and of what is capable of *refraining to feel*. In particular, our Lord Jesus speaks of anger and of lust. Let us begin with anger. Jesus says this:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.” <sup>22</sup>But I say to you that if you are *angry* with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; (Matthew 5:21-22, NRSV)

Let us begin by recalling the old story of Cain killing his brother, Abel. The great tragedy of that story is that Cain did not heed the call of the Lord to refrain from anger. Cain was furious because the LORD had accepted the sacrifice of Abel, but not Cain’s sacrifice. The LORD spoke to Cain about this, appealing to him to get his anger under control. The words go this way:

<sup>6</sup>The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? <sup>7</sup>If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” (Genesis 4:6-7, RSV)

But Cain did not master his anger, with the result of bloodshed. And so we read of Cain’s deceit and violence against his brother:

<sup>8</sup>Cain said to Abel his brother, “Let us go out to the field.” And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. (Genesis 4:6-7, RSV)

It was a disaster for both men. For Abel, it meant his death, along with deep sorrow for anyone who loved him. For Cain, it meant that he became a fugitive on earth, with his brother’s blood crying unto the LORD from the ground (Genesis 4:10).

Now, here is the question I want to press upon us – upon both you and myself: Did Cain have freedom to master his anger? Think of a time when you

were furious, when your countenance fell, and you saw red, you were so angry. Did you have freedom in that moment to turn away from your anger? To maintain our humanity, we must answer, Yes!

Why do I phrase my answer in terms of our “humanity”? Answer: because of all God’s creatures, we are the ones to whom our Maker speaks. He does not simply speak *about* us, but also *to* us. He does not simply say, “Let there be men and women, boys and girls,” but also he speaks *to* men and women, boys and girls. And when he speaks his holy law to us, he *thereby* grants us freedom to obey. So when the LORD said to Cain, “You must master your wrath,” he was not addressing a rock or a tree. He was addressing a man. And if a human being refuses to heed the voice of the Lord right there in his or her heart, then that person drives himself onward toward becoming a rock or a stick. Never imagine that you are incapable of obeying the Lord. If the Lord says, You must master your anger, then know that you are free to turn and walk away from the one who has angered you, no matter how intense your anger might be.

We are left in little wonder at what the human heart is capable of *feeling*. We probably all have enough experience with the tempests and temptations, the sunshine and exhilaration of the heart, that we are no longer amazed at what the heart is capable of feeling. The wonder before us in this morning’s Gospel Lesson is not so much what we are capable of feeling, it is rather the wonder of what we human beings are capable of *refraining* to feel. “You must master your wrath, Cain,” says the LORD. Do not imagine that the Lord is just whistling Dixie here. He is serious. He means it. Cain must get his anger under control. For anger is the parent of murder. And “thou shalt not murder!”

In this morning’s Gospel story, it is as Jesus is saying to beginning students, We must rise to another level. “You have heard of old that ‘Thou shalt not commit murder.’ But now I say to you that we must go to the root of the problem. We must get the human heart under control. We must seek for a better heart – one that not only refrains from murder, but also refrains from that wrath that tempts us toward murder.”

Now let me speak of something good: When Jesus calls us to refrain from anger, he is shepherding us along into a better life. How many lives have been spoiled by a refusal to give up anger? The angry one might never commit murder, might never raise a hand against the opponent, might not even say an unkind word about that one, yet in the heart there is a longstanding wrath that eats away at the person. There is an ancient anger that is driving the person along toward bitterness. There is a primeval passion that is transforming the person into a harder man, a harder woman, depriving that person of peace, perhaps even provoking ulcers in the stomach and breaking down health. The abiding anger robs the person of patience, inclines the person toward explosiveness, tempts the person toward daydreams of revenge and nighttime images of humiliation for the opponent. It would be

better to give it all up. "Sin is couching at the door;" say the LORD who loves us. "Its desire is for you, but you must master it." Let the anger go. Let the person go in peace. Commend that one to the Lord and try to move on in life with a better heart.

Do you remember Commandments Nine and Ten, as Luther counts them? They are called the "coveting commandments." They are decidedly *unmodern* commandments, hardly ever spoken of, and yet I feel that they are deeply needed in our world. The Ninth Commandment says, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's *house*." The Tenth Commandment rhymes with it: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's *spouse*." Luther interprets these commandments as forbidding us to do that which is unworthy of a Christian, even if we could legally get away with it. But the more traditional interpretation speaks of the "desires of the heart." We are to get the desires of our heart under control. We are not to "covet." That is, we are not to desire anything *overmuch*, like our neighbor's house, nor are we to desire that which we ought not to have, like our neighbor's spouse.

The reason these commandments are worthy of renewed appreciation is that we live in a world that is skillful and learned in placing desires into our hearts. And so, perfectly fine clothes are set aside, because advertising has instilled a desire for a new fashion in our hearts. All kinds of desires are crafted and skillfully launched into us. The coveting commandments invite us to get our hearts back under control. They encourage us to be more thoughtful about the desires we actually permit in our lives.

Do not be angry, Jesus says. Anger is not simply a *given* in life. It is something over which we have more control than we might imagine. We can decline to nurse anger, we can release daydreams of revenge, best of all, we can do what Jesus urges us to do in this morning's reading: we can seek reconciliation with the one who has offended us. Cain wishes he had done that. Through all eternity, Cain wishes that he had mastered his anger and so not killed his brother.

So, that is the first part of this sermon. Jesus says to us, "Be not angry with your brother or your sister." Let it go, lest anger become parent to violence.

The second part of this sermon concerns lust. It corresponds to the Tenth Commandment: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's spouse. As the Bible sees things, we have power over our passions. We can step back from desiring people we ought to be leaving in peace, like our neighbor's spouse, and we can step back from desiring sex overmuch.

Again, we live in a world that is skillful and learned in ratcheting up lust. One thing leads to another so easily. But do not be swept along. Jesus says:

<sup>27</sup>You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." <sup>28</sup>But I say to you that everyone who looks at a

woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28, NRSV)

As it is with anger, so is it with lust: the passion is parent to the deed. And even if the passion never breaks forth in the deed, still the passion is treating others improperly in imagination. There, in the wild world of imagination, we are treating others without enough love for the m.

Again, as it was with anger, so it is with lust: Our Lord's teaching against lust, to our surprise, could well lead us into a happier life. Marriages can be wrecked, romances not even commenced, because someone is living too much in the world of lust, too much out of touch with real people. The great thing about our Lord's teaching in his Sermon on the Mount is that it beckons us toward purity of heart and an even happier life.

Always I am delighted to think of Garrison Keillor's line about Powdermilk biscuits:

Powdermilk biscuits: Heavens, they're tasty and expeditious! They're made from whole wheat, to give shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done.

This is what I am talking about in this sermon: We have more strength than we might know "to get up and do what needs to be done." We might be shy, we might be angry, we might be lustful, we might be lazy, we might incline in ten thousand different directions, but still we have strength to get up and do what needs to be done. We need not be the slaves of the desires in our hearts. We can walk our own path, regardless of our desires, and we can even wean ourselves of those desires if we work at it hard enough.

The One who teaches these things is certainly One who lived by them. This is good news for humanity and for each one of us, for I fear that too often we let our God down and could arouse his anger. I mean, I imagine Jesus from time to time exclaiming to the Father and the Holy Spirit, "Did you see what Gregory just did! I can't believe he did that! He is really disappointing." Yet the frustration of Jesus never breaks forth into our destruction. Remember that line - and tremble! - about Jesus summoning the angels. It happened in the Garden of Gethsemane when they came out with swords and torches to arrest our Lord. One of the disciples tried to defend Jesus by wielding a sword, but Jesus commanded him to put his sword away. Jesus speaks only the cold truth:

Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? (Matthew 26:53, KJV)

The anger or frustration of Jesus *could have* meant our destruction, but here we are, still standing. Jesus was well able to give strong answers to his opponents. He was well able to stand up for the truth. Yet he never surrendered his love. He never let his anger or frustration overwhelm his love or his mission. The apostle could well have phrased his exhortation about anger by simply remembering Jesus:

Be ye angry, [but] sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: (Ephesians 4:26, KJV)

If ever there was Someone who knew what he was talking about when he urges us to back off from anger and lust, it is Jesus Christ, through whom we were made, who lived our life and knew our temptations, who never succumbed to sin, and who lives his pure life even now, urging us on toward purity of heart too. This great Teacher is our great Saviour, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.