

DID JESUS REALLY SAY THAT?

Right Relationships Trump Ritual

Matthew 5:21-26

Dr. Doyle Sager, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri

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In Carnegie Baptist Church in South St. Joseph, MO, many years ago, a little boy was called on to pray at the close of the Sunday School hour. As he prayed, his friend kept poking him, trying to get him to laugh. The praying lad said, "Just a minute, Lord." Then he turned and popped the friend, right on the arm, then finished his prayer. (By the way, kids, don't try that...poking or hitting!).

Maybe that story is a parable for church life today. We live in a culture that thinks it's OK just to go to church, say some God-words, give some money, show up...then go live as you want to. Say pretty words to God, but be a devil to others, hold grudges, as if there is no connection between what happens in here and out there. Jesus insists there is a connection.

First of all, I want us to notice that Jesus assumes we will worship. He says, "When you are offering your gift at the altar..." Not if; when. We need worship. We need God. Next, Jesus assumes we will give something when we come to worship. We take worship so lightly. So carelessly. We come rushing in here, thoughtlessly assuming Rod and Doyle will do our work for us. We send God an email or text, "Meet me at the corner of hurry and rush; I only have about 45 minutes, so make it fast--and by the way, make it good!"

Now think about this. Most scholars believe that Jesus' language implies he is talking about the Temple, not a local synagogue. Holy. Sacred. The very presence of God represented there. What could be more important than that holy moment when gifts and sacrifices were offered? Imagine the moment when you offer a cereal offering, or two pigeons or a goat. At the holiest moment, you stand up and say, "Time out! God, may we push the pause button?" Jesus is actually encouraging such an interruption.

As we think about it, we're there in the first place because we sense that our relationship with God has been disrupted, something is not right, broken. But Jesus says, "That's true of our relationships with others, too." Think how closely the two are related--our vertical and our horizontal relationships. In fact, isn't it possible that worshipping there at the altar is what triggered the memory that something is wrong in a horizontal relationship? Worship is dangerous and scary. It allows Someone other than yourself to enter into the very center of your being, to see and to name what we would rather leave alone, in the dark.

Jesus insists worship is always tied to action. Note the active verbs: leave, go, reconcile, offer, make friends. Note how counter-cultural this is, because instead of leaving, we want to hide in

church; instead of going, we want to remain in comfort; instead of reconciling, we want to carry the grudge; instead of offering, we withhold. And instead of making friends, we remain aloof.

We can be doctrinally sound and empty of love. We can be the person in the house who reads the Bible the most, prays the most, but a fraud in relationships. We have this nasty habit of creating silos, compartmentalizing our lives, walling off parts, as if God has nothing to do with them. I think I can illustrate that by a University of Michigan study on forgiveness from several years ago. Of the people surveyed, almost 75% believed they were forgiven by God, but only 52% said they practiced forgiving others. And 60% of those said they had forgiven themselves, but only 43% had sought forgiveness for harm they had done to others [University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, cited in *Christian Century*, Jan. 2, 2002, p. 15].

Think seriously about the word "reconcile" in v. 24. It means to be changed straight through our being. It means that we are set right with God and others in a way that alters us. How many of us can say with honesty this morning, we all love the comfort of the Gospel, but we often leave out the transforming nature of it? And we could say the same about worship.

A German nurse named Jutta was serving in a hospital during WWII. One day Jutta observed the head losing her temper with an inexperienced nurse, speaking to the young employee harshly. Jutta heard it all happen and then watched as the head nurse put on her hat, preparing to go to church. Jutta said to the head nurse, "You'd better not go to church today, for the Bible says you are first to be reconciled to the person you have injured." The head nurse tried to defend her actions by saying the inexperienced assistant should have known better, had made the same mistake before and that it was unforgivable. Jutta replied, "My father was put in a concentration camp by Adolf Hitler, but he has forgiven Hitler." Jutta's last name was Niemoller. Her father, Martin Niemoller, was a German pastor, imprisoned for a time by the Nazis.

Are you having trouble forgiving someone? Having trouble with a relationship? Remember, you've been to the altar and you've been with Jesus, the sacrifice AND the priest. You are not facing this broken relationship alone. The Risen Christ, the one who forgave his murderers, walks with you.