

*“Create Right Relationships”*

As our Threshold Moment stated, “Who we are cannot be fulfilled in isolation. We were made for relationship and for passing on the life and love given to us by God. We’ve all experienced the pain of broken relationships and the joy of restored ones. **How does our relationship to others define us? How does living in right relationship with friend and stranger send reverberations into the world and into the future?**”

Anger has had a major role in the breaking of relationships. A very violent and destructive example of how anger has broken many relationships has been retold by Adrian Dieleman. Dieleman recounted, “In the Spring of 1894, the Baltimore Orioles came to Boston to play a routine baseball game. But what happened that day was anything but routine. The Orioles’ John McGraw got into a fight with the Boston third baseman. Within minutes all the players from both teams had joined in the brawl. The warfare quickly spread to the grandstands. Among the fans the conflict went from bad to worse.” Dieleman concluded the result of all that anger was, **“Someone set fire to the stands and the entire ballpark burned to the ground. Not only that, but the fire spread to 107 other Boston buildings as well.”** (Adrian Dieleman, “Be First to Seek Reconciliation” posted on sermons.com)

The sermons.com staff reminds us, “Jesus warns us against anger, and reminds us to find a better way to resolve our conflicts. It is impossible to avoid confrontations and conflict, but we should never let anger poison our relationships or lead to damage that is impossible to undo.” That situation reminded the staff “of a traditional Irish poem:

**There once were two cats of Kilkenny,**  
Each thought there was one cat too many;  
So they fought and they fit,  
And they scratched and they bit,  
Till, excepting their nails,  
And the tips of their tails,  
Instead of two cats there weren’t any.

The staff concluded, “When anger takes over, irrational actions can lead to self-destruction and harm to others. While the cats of Kilkenny might be unable to control their animal nature, Jesus reminds us we certainly can.” (Traditional as posted on sermons.com)

In our Gospel Lectionary Reading from Matthew, Jesus reminded his hearers during the Sermon on the Mount of the commandment against murder as he raised the problem of destructive anger. David E. Leininger said, “Obviously, murder is not the only outcome of anger.” **“Other harm can be done as well. Angry words can wound with insult.”** Leininger asked, “Have you ever been hurt ... REALLY hurt ... by what someone said to you? It has happened to most of us.” Leininger continued, “Let me tell you about an elderly lady, a shy and sensitive lady who lived to be just three weeks shy of her 100th birthday. When she was a young girl, about ten years old or so, somebody told her that she had a terrible singing voice. Now, most of us, I guess, would not let that remark bother us particularly, but it DID bother this lady. Ten years old is a tender age. It bothered her so much that, for the remaining 90 years of her life, she never sang another note. No one had any idea whether she had a good voice or a bad voice; she would never take the chance of letting anyone find out, and all because of one person’s careless and unfeeling insult.” (PAUSE) (David E. Leininger, *Make it Right!*)

Being insulted, abused, or ridiculed has been an all too common experience. **Forgiveness is very difficult for most adults to do but Leo Buscalgia revealed how it is different for children.** He wrote about his observation of “two children having an argument. The children were quarreling 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 Buscalgia passed by the playground 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,’ Buscalgia” wrote.** “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,’ Buscalgia concluded. ‘Somewhere in the process of growing up we seem to have become experts at holding grudges, cradling fragile egos and unforgiving natures.’ [Leo F. Buscalgia, *Born for Love* (New York: Slack, Inc., 1992), p. 202.]

From personal experience, I have apologized numerous times to family, church members, and others, as I have come to recognize how I said or did something inappropriate or wrong. I greatly appreciate the many times I have been forgiven by members and family. **Jesus made it clear that being willing to forgive is important for any of his followers seeking to live the New Life he demonstrated.** I know it has been liberating for me to forgive those who have wronged me, even when I have not been asked for my forgiveness. Letting go of feelings of hurt and injustice, has enabled me to live and function in line with Jesus’ call to love one another. Try it. It will set you free and enable you to more fully live the New Life in Christ – to create right relationships with your family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, church family, and even strangers.

Thomas Long expounded on relationships and the redefining of them in the Gospel Reading: **“The Old Testament Law condemned murder (Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:18), but at the heart of this law lies a respect for the life of another, regard for the right of**

**another to be, reverence for another as the creation of God.”** (Thomas Long as reported in “Grow” by Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson posted on Weekly Seeds)

Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson wrote, “The text goes as far as encouraging those who are not treated well to reach out and foster places of reconciliation.

If relationship – and more specifically right relationship – is the issue being addressed, then what follows in” Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount “is perhaps more of the same. The problems cited are divisive and destructive for the life of the church. The issues themselves are not the problem; instead it is how members of the church are engaged with each other and allowing for unity to be present among them.”

Thompson continued, **“Relationships are not to be taken lightly. The command to love God and to love others as self is unstated but is also central to reading the text. Mutuality and respect come when individuals honor neighbor as self. It is only then that right relationship is realized. Right relationship comes from the heart!”**

Thompson concluded with these questions, “What is our view of humanity? Do we have a vision for justice that will bring about racial healing and equality? Do we have a vision for reconciliation that will provide a hope and a future for those who are marginalized and ostracized by society? The text takes us to hard places which involve looking at our hearts and creating newness within.” (“Grow” by Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson posted on Weekly Seeds)

Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, **“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.”**

Referring to that text, Rev. David Lose said to preachers, “if God really does care so much about our relationships that God would rather have us tend those relationships than come to church (and that’s how I read verses 23-24) – then maybe we can invite our people to do two things this week ... First, let’s invite them to call to mind one of the relationships in their lives that is most important to them. One that is healthy and whole and good and sustains them regularly. Ask them to think about **what makes that a good relationship**, about **why it’s so important**, and invite them to **give God thanks for that person and the relationship** they share.

Second, then ask them to call to mind another relationship that is important to them but that has **suffered some damage**. They don’t need to figure out who was to blame for the hurt, but rather to **hold that person and relationship in prayer**. To **offer that broken relationship to God** as an offering and **as an arena of God’s help and healing**. Invite them to think about **what action** they can take **to move that relationship to greater health**.” (“The Relational God” by David Lose posted on workingpreacher.org)

Friends, you heard me share Lose’s questions. **What makes an important relationship of yours a good one? What important relationship do you have which has suffered? Will you lift up that relationship to God in prayer asking for help and healing? What action can you take to move that relationship to greater health?**

Our Old Testament Reading from Deuteronomy reported Moses stating to the Israelites, as they were about to enter the Promise Land, **“Choose life so that you and your descendants may live”**. Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt shared, “All we have is this simple guide which we are promised will lead to life:” **“In this choice am I loving and worshiping God? In this choosing am I loving my neighbor?”**

Hunt continued, “Indeed, perhaps as I ‘choose life’” with these questions as my guide it may lead to making a difference ... And for those countless others wherever I may meet them for whom the choices between life and death are starker than I may ever be able to imagine.” **“Indeed, what does loving God look like as I seek to love them?”** “And how are we called to do that together?”

Hunt concluded by asking these questions, “Where might you find a neighbor whose choice between life and death is stark? On your local college campus? In the hospital emergency room? At the grocery store? In the office next to yours?” **“And what will it mean for you and me and for all of us together to ‘choose life’ for the sake of those who are seeking to ‘choose life’ every single day?”** (“Choosing Life ...” by Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt posted on dancingwiththeword.com)

Yes, God has revealed to us in Jesus Christ the Life – the **New Life in Christ**, which is choosing Life! This New Life includes **Loving God** with our all and **Loving one another** as ourselves. Turning away from anger and all of the other self-centered approaches to life enables us to more fully embody the New Life in Christ. **Creating Right Relationships by Forgiving, Inviting into Relationship, Welcoming, and Agape Loving All People is what it really means to “Choose Life”!** Amen.