



First Things First

Week 1: First be Reconciled

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It was the crazy Ozarks weather we had this week that caused me to think about a question. How do you learn to snow ski? Buy or rent a pair of skis. Ride a lift to the top of a mountain. Turn your skis toward the bottom and push off. Right? Easy peasy. No. Wait. Back that up.

Buy or rent a pair of snow boots and skis. Ride a lift to the top of a bunny slope. Get off the lift. Turn your skis downhill. Now push off. Easy peasy. No. Wait. Back that up again.

From Missouri, drive to say, Winter Park, Colorado where you have signed up for ski lessons and already bought a lift ticket for the days you will be skiing. Now rent the boots and skis, and learn how to put them on—and maneuver in them, which is a challenge in and of itself. Find your way clumsily to the ski school and make sure you are in the appropriate class. The instructor will teach you how to bend your knees and waddle to the ski lift where you will be helped on and hopefully remember to get off when you reach the top of the bunny slope. There you will practice starting—and more importantly stopping—as you make your way down the easiest of hills. And then do that again and again until, lo and behold, you find that you are skiing.

No wait... first things first. There is another question. Do you even want to snow ski? Before you invest in the expense of a trip. Before you make the reservations and take the time off work. Before you get in the car. Do you

want to ski? IF the answer is no then the rest of the planning is a moot point. But if the answer is yes, there are important things to know, consider, and decide in order for it to happen.

This may seem like a frivolous metaphor for a Sunday morning, especially if you have no intentions of skiing ever, or like me, ever again. Yet, think with me a bit about how you learn to follow Jesus?

How do we do something that seems so counterintuitive to the world in which we are living? How do we participate in bringing the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven when we often feel like we are standing on the top of a mountain and the only way to go involves a snowy slope forward where we are convinced we will fall, and guess what? We will.

I invite you over the next couple of weeks to look at what Jesus has said about doing the “first things” first. As he taught the crowds and his disciples on the hillside, Jesus is teaching you and me today about how to approach the difficult, challenging circumstances that surround us. He is putting before us opportunities to join with the Holy Spirit in making a difference in this world so that now, and not just someday, we live with peace, justice, and love.

Jesus is showing us how what we do, what we say, matters not just to ourselves individually but also to others. Our schools, our neighborhoods, our businesses, our community, our state, our world. And, I just misspoke. The better way to say that would be God’s schools, God’s neighborhood, God’s world, for the sooner we recognize that all people are made in the image of God, the more putting the first things first—as Jesus taught us—will begin to happen.

Have any of you been angry this past say... four years? I am going that far back because I think for me the anger I have carried around in my mind, body, and spirit began to settle in probably even before then, but really grew in these past four years. Anger that was so close to fear, as COVID 19 became

a pandemic. Anger at denominational issues. I found my sense of disappointment grew as I felt myself and others in the church losing sight of Jesus' call for unity in His body. Anger at the overt racism and other isms that made clear the harm humans are capable of inflicting. Anger at a powerful country invading another and displacing millions and killing thousands. And anger when things in my own family were not going as I planned, as I wanted, and I was not in control.

I love Jesus and I have sought to follow him all of my life, with many fits and starts along the way. I love the local church. I love being the pastor of this local church as we seek to follow Jesus together and extend the kingdom of God. And, when it comes to anger, I am very human. You? Anyone else struggled with anger? The past few years? Today?

As we read these words of Jesus from the 5th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, I invite you to consider that Jesus is not telling us that if we follow him we will never experience the feeling of anger. And friends, please hear me clearly, I do believe that anger can be a very important sign that something is wrong, there is injustice being committed, there are violations that cannot continue. Anger is an appropriate feeling as we work through the grief and the pain that comes with loss. Anger that is not expressed can fester and be revealed in so many injurious ways. Jesus is challenging us to look carefully at what we do with our anger.

The scripture today is part of what is known as the Sermon on the Mount. In it, Jesus has said clearly that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets. He speaks words that do not discount the ancient words of Holy Scripture that he will quote and teach. He takes those words and expands their meaning to describe the kingdom he has come on earth to inaugurate. He is showing us, in word and in deed, the cost of unresolved, festering, wounding, weaponized anger. And he is showing us glimpses of the possibilities of a world where love and peace reign. The world he has come to restore.

Hear these words, beginning in Matthew 5 with verse 21:

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. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Jesus begins by quoting the ten commandments. You shall not murder. We nod as we hear these words. This is a God given law handed down to Moses to the people of Israel. This is a law that can be regulated. Got it. But then Jesus backs up to the relationship between people. Relationships cannot be regulated by law, as much as we may try. For relationships are between humans with choices. So Jesus backs up.

Before there was a murder, there was unresolved anger. Jesus doesn't specify whether it was justified or unjustified. He isn't drawing lines or choosing sides. He is just naming that there was anger. And then Jesus backs up again.

Before the anger was out of control, there was name calling and accusation. There were words thrown about with the intention of harming, belittling, insulting. There were words that, once said, could never be unsaid. Once they landed on the ears of another they could never be unheard. Jesus doesn't say

who started it, who spoke the first ugly words. He is talking to *us*. The ones who love God. The ones who are seeking to participate in a different way of life. The ones who are willing to try again and again to be part of the restoration of the world with Jesus.

When we gather to worship the Lord, when we bow before God's majesty and grace, when we are willing to accept that to honor God requires something of us, we have to get up and do something about it.

Theologian Karoline Lewis describes it this way:

When we start thinking and understanding that our actions not only reveal who we are but also the communities of which we are a part, we begin to feel the weight of what it means to be a member of a community—and we should. When we remember that God is with *us*, not just that God is with *me*, we begin to realize we are not simply members of community but shapers of community and are shaped by community, all of which tells a critical theological truth—our God is a God of community.

Becoming what Dr. Lewis calls “shapers of community” calls us to bear both an individual and a collective responsibility. What we say to one another can and will determine the health of our relationships. What we say as The Downtown Church to our community can and will determine the impact we make for Christ. Words matter. Always.

The Holy Spirit will reveal to you and to me, if we will humble ourselves and seek to know, who our words have harmed. And once we remember, we will not rest easy until we have addressed that harm. At times by a conversation. At times by an apology. At times by taking the time to watch carefully how our implicit bias and unexamined prejudices are keeping us from knowing the value of another person. And I want to acknowledge that at times this is best done with the help of a therapist. For there may be times when the

person is not safe or the situation would only continue the harm, to you or to another.

When the words have escalated to anger, we know it. Unresolved anger creates incredible stress in our mind, body, and spirit. Personally, I feel sick. Truly ill. And I want the feeling to go away. Lashing out physically and verbally doesn't heal the anger. Tweeting and Facebooking a tirade doesn't heal the anger; it only makes sure others have the opportunity to be angry too. That way we can feel more and more justified in being angry.

Murder? No, not us. At least we haven't murdered anyone. You and I have only to look at the news to see where words led to anger, led to death and great harm. Intentional and accidental. Invasions of another nation, suicide bombings, mass murders, a firearm in the hands of a child.

We also have a collective responsibility as The Downtown Church. Where words have caused harm, we are to make amends. Whether or not the words were ours. Where the institution of church has caused anger that betrayed the testimony of love of Jesus, we have to repent and reconcile. I know. It is so hard. I'm working on it too. And if we ever find ourselves thinking that for a moment we have a right to weaponize our anger? We will need to close our doors, because we have ceased to be the body of Christ in this world.

First things first. First be reconciled one to the other. Listen to how these same words of Jesus from Matthew 5 sound in the Message version:

²¹⁻²² "You're familiar with the command to the ancients, 'Do not murder.' I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother 'idiot!' and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell 'stupid!' at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.

²³⁻²⁴ “This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.

²⁵⁻²⁶ “Or say you’re out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don’t lose a minute.

Make the first move; make things right with him. After all, if you leave the first move to him, knowing his track record, you’re likely to end up in court, maybe even jail. If that happens, you won’t get out without a stiff fine.

Do you want to follow Jesus? How can we, today, join with Jesus to bring about the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven? Back up. First things first. Before you attempt to ski down a black double diamond, learn these lessons well:

- **Remember that words kill—think carefully before you speak.**
- **When the Holy Spirit reminds, make things right.**
- **Come back to God, over and over again.**
- **Make the first move. And make it in love.**