

Original Sin

Matthew 5:21-30

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders 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; 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. 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. 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. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

Imagine an Egyptian city in turmoil. There is a group of people clamoring for freedom- freedom of speech; freedom to believe and worship in the ways they want to. And then there’s the leadership, an autocratic regime that will do anything to stay in power as long as they possibly can. And then there’s a more practical group- just everyday Egyptians trying to go about their lives who just wish things were more normal.

Now, we don’t have to imagine this, do we? We see the images from Tahrir square every day of this. But actually what I had in mind isn’t the Egypt of today- but the Egypt of 1,800 years ago.

1,800 hundred years ago Egypt was also in an uproar. Only then, the issue wasn't politics but religion. Back then they weren't fighting over whether they should have a democracy, but whether it was OK to be Christian.

Now, when we think of Christians being persecuted, we almost always imagine the Roman coliseum and Christians being fed to lions. And sometimes this was true- that did happen sporadically. But really, only a tiny amount of persecution happened in Rome. MOST of the persecution happened in Northern and Eastern Africa with Egypt being one of the hardest hit of all.

And it's in this conflicted, tortured Egypt that one of the greatest fathers of the church, a man some call the church's first theologian, was born. His name was Origen. When he was just sixteen, his father Leonidas was arrested for being Christian, and he was given the choice to sacrifice to the Roman gods or be killed. He chose death. His headstrong son wanted to join him. The only thing that prevented him from dying so young is that his mother had gathered up all his clothes and sent them to his uncle. Willing to die, but NOT willing to be seen in his underpants, Origen stayed home and learned what it was to grow up having God alone for a father.

And maybe this is what propelled him into such an amazing life. Origen is one of the sharpest tools in the church shed. He wrote thousands of pages of Bible commentary and theological works. His crowning achievement was the monumental Hexapla, a compilation of six different Hebrew and Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible he gathered together side by side. And last but not least he is widely recognized to be responsible for collecting the books known as the New Testament. So, Origen was kind of a big deal. And what he wanted most of all was

to figure out how to interpret the Bible- when to read it literally, and when to take it with a grain of salt.

But you know the Bible is a tricky thing, isn't it? It doesn't come with reading instructions. And we, you and I, we have to make decisions about what passages to read more literally, and what passages to read more figuratively.

For instance Deuteronomy 21:18 plainly states that if you have a disobedient child, one who, and I quote "will not obey father and mother", then you shall throw them out and call in the stoning squad who will come and quite literally throw rocks at them until they are dead. Now...I know there are times when you have felt like doing this. I know my mom felt like this on more than one occasion. But even people I know who would say they read the Bible literally- none of them would do this. And thank goodness.

Now, you might say, well hey, that's just the Old Testament. That thing is full of crazy stuff. But the New Testament. Hey, it's new and improved. And it's shorter. There's less room for weird stuff. Surely we can take the New Testament literally. And yet, when you wander over to the Book of Acts- a major work that tells the story of the birth of the church you run into problems early. In 4:32 to be exact, we find out that the church was actually a commune- if you wanted to be a member, you had to come and bring all of your stuff and lay it before the feet of Peter. Just to show how important this concept is, like, it's not optional, one couple, Annanias and Sapphira sold some property and made a killing on it. But they decided to hold a little back. Why should the church get all of it? But when Annanias made out his check, Peter looks at him like, "Is that it?" And he goes, "Yeah." And Peter says, "Really. It's everything. You're

sure?” And he goes, “Yeah.” And I like to think Peter was at least shaking his head sadly when Annanias dropped dead before God and everybody like some kind of gruesome warning to the free market capitalists.

Now the book of Acts could not be more clear. In the church we are supposed to be one big hippie commune where we bring everything we’ve got- money, property, everything. No other text comes in and contradicts this. When pastors get together we all joke about preaching this during stewardship season. But none of us ever does, because even though it’s right there in the Bible in black and white- even the most conservative American Christians, in fact especially the most conservative American Christians, believe in private property more than they believe in the Bible, at least when it comes to Acts 4:32.

But then you think, yeah, but what about Jesus? I mean that was just the Book of Acts. What about Jesus who spoke in that bold Red Letter King James English of his. SURELY we can take THAT literally. RIGHT?

And this is where we get back to Origen. Origen- this amazing, brilliant, INCREDIBLE scholar, this lover of Scripture. Origen knew the passage we heard for today. He didn’t even have to read it in translation like we do- he grew up speaking Greek. He was especially interested in Jesus words about sin: “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it’s better to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.” Oh, Origen knew these words. All too well. Indeed, he paired up this verse up with a later one in Matthew about becoming a eunuch for the kingdom of God, and one day, one really bad day, Origen decided that of all of

Jesus' words- THESE were the ones to take literally. And let's just say Origen decided he would literally remove what he believed might cause him to sin. Origen mutilated himself, making Aaron Ralston, that guy who sawed his own arm off in Utah, seem like a wimp.

Now, this. What Origen did- this was a shock to the whole church. And, although he wasn't entirely to blame, he set off a kind of firestorm in the larger church that resulted with the early Church forming into two tribes divided by a host of theological issues, but mainly divided over how to read the Bible.

On the one hand you had the Antiochenes, named from their base in Antioch. The Antiochenes were the kind of people who said, "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it." The Antiochenes believed the literal meaning of scripture was the most important. Even if they didn't have the guts to follow Origen's example, they certainly liked the way he interpreted Matthew.

On the other side of the fence, though, you had the Alexandrians, based in Alexandria. They believed the Bible is a spiritual book pointing to a spiritual reality, and to them the literal meaning of scripture is the least important. Alexandrians were terribly excited about allegory- they tended to see every story in the Bible as having some kind of symbolic meaning.

The best example of an allegory I know of happens right here every Easter Sunday morning. Mike Shiffer or Scott Cameron or someone invites the kids to come forward. And what do they have waiting for them? An egg, a bottle, and something flammable. And they explain that these things are really symbolic. So the egg is new life. The bottle is a body. And

the fire is the Holy Spirit. And when you light the fire inside the bottle and the egg gets sucked inside, this symbolizes the Holy Spirit bringing new life into our hearts on Easter morning.

The Alexandrians would have LOVED this. They would say the whole Bible is like this with every story having a kind of symbolic meaning for those patient enough to listen for it.

But the Antiochenes...not so much.

And unfortunately, these two groups hardened into tribes. They stopped talking to one another. They stopped eating together. And for the next 500 years they clashed with one another in church council after church council. And they didn't just fight using words, either. Riots actually broke out. Blood was spilled. Leaders were even put to death or banished if they were very, very lucky.

And if I had to say that what Origen did was a sin- I would have to say it's not so much his crazy reading of Matthew 5 here (and I do think it's crazy), or even him mutilating himself. The real sin to me is the effect that his act had on the whole body, tearing it into two pieces who offered the false choice between saying the Bible has to EITHER be literally true OR figuratively true, when any reasonable person knows that the Bible is far more complicated, far more interesting, than that.

Now, the good news is things are a little better today in the church. It is a rare thing to see anyone put to death at a Presbytery meeting, although there are a few of us who could offer some names from time to time. But the tribalism in our denomination is as powerful as ever.

Some of you might have heard that a group of pastors mainly from large Presbyterian churches got together and wrote an open letter to the entire denomination a few weeks back. I'm actually curious- has ANYONE heard about this? Yeah, most of us were blissfully unaware of this and probably didn't feel like we missed anything. But right now it has a LOT of our brothers and sisters in a tizzy.

In their letter these pastors expressed frustration that our denomination is so full of so many different views, especially views with which they disagree. And they are so frustrated in fact that the main point of their letter is they are going to meet later this year in Minneapolis to try and come up with a plan to separate from the denomination- or at the very least form a kind of denomination within a denomination they are calling "The Fellowship".

One of their key ideas is to form new Presbyteries that are not geographic regions, but would be collections of like-minded churches. So, a church in Portland might wind up being not in a Presbytery with us, for example, even though we're just down the road- but in a Presbytery with a church from Utah or California, maybe. And all because some of the leaders in those churches like the same books and tend to vote the same way. Basically, their idea is to go back to being Antiochenes and Alexandrians again, only without the cool names.

And I have to say while I'm sure this would make some things easier, I mean it's always nice to hang out with people who mostly agree with you. And it probably would make some of our Presbytery meetings less heated at times. But I really hope we decide not to do this. And it's not because I just have some kind of Kum Ba Ya wish that we could all just get along. But it's because, like the Antiochenes and Alexandrians, we actually need each other. We need each other if we want to see the whole picture. Frankly put, hanging around like-minded people

blinds us to the full complexity of the world around us, and worse, because it feels so good to be agreed with all the time, we don't even know how blind we are becoming.

In 1987 United Air flight 173 was flying from Denver, Colorado right here to Portland, OR. They had descended and the captain lowered the landing gears when they all heard a weird noise and the plane yawed unexpectedly, or pulled to the side. Only two of the three indicator lights came on to indicate the landing gears were all locked down.

Portland, we have a problem.

The captain immediately did all the right things. He radioed the tower and let them know what was going on. He put the plane into a series of slow circles around the airport so they could work on the problem and figure out what to do. The only thing he didn't do, and this turned out to be a critical error, he didn't listen to his crew members when they began to disagree with his judgment.

See, while the captain was focused intently on the landing gear issue, another crew member began to speak up about what he considered to be a more pressing problem- they were nearly out of fuel. Fuel is one of the heaviest elements of a plane, and to reduce costs, planes always try to fly with just the bare minimum of what they think they can get away with. So, here they were at the end of their journey from Colorado. And first one crew member, and then the others, began to press the captain about it, until he screamed at them telling them all to shut up, that he was the captain, and he would be making the decisions.

And he did. His last decision, if you could call it that, was to crash land the plane at 15808 East Burnside. You all could drive over this afternoon and see right where it happened. Despite the landing gear malfunction the crash was ruled pilot error. And United instituted a sweeping reform in pilot training known as CRM: Crew Resource Management. Today, this has become the industry standard around the world.

In Crew Resource Management training the pilot is in charge of the flight- there's no question about that. But the pilot and the crew are all trained to speak up. Lex Brockington a captain for Southwest puts it this way: "There was a time when the captain was almighty, in charge of everything, almost godlike. The captain was making a decision and everyone else was scared to overrule him and wouldn't open their mouths." Now, however, every crew member is trained to challenge the captain- not cause a morale problem, but because it turns out that all of us are a heck of a lot safer in the air when cockpit is full of dissent rather than agreement. Today this is what Brockington tells every crew member he serves with: "We all make mistakes. If you see something that you don't like, it won't hurt my feelings." (Sway p. 166.)

This week may we give thanks for the people with whom we disagree. Sometimes they drive us a little nuts. I know. But their perspectives help us see the world more as it really is, their questions make us think through our own positions more carefully, and you know what- sometimes, sometimes dog gone it they are even right now and again, and they teach us something we needed to learn.

This week may we give thanks for the people who disagree with us. Believe me, if only Origen would have had even ONE friend who disagreed with him when he was interpreting Matthew, he would have been grateful indeed. **Amen.**