

Sermon Draft

Text: Matthew 5:21–37

Sermon: “Peace Be With You”

Leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

(Matthew 5:24)

Jesus spoke these words in his Sermon on the Mount in Galilee to people who regularly traveled south to Jerusalem to present their offerings on the Temple Mount. This was the great altar located just outside the doors of the temple. Thousands of worshipers brought sacrificial animals to be offered on this high altar.

A Lutheran parishioner once shared that when she was a child her parents took her to church every Sunday. She vividly recalled that every time the Lord’s Supper was celebrated her father would lean over to her mother and say, “I’m sorry.” The lady admitted that for years she kept wondering what it was that her father kept doing wrong. We can all learn from this faithful Lutheran husband, and we would do well to imitate his actions.

Nevertheless, like all husbands, wives, families, and church members, our efforts at reconciliation are never enough and never finished.

Matthew wrote the words of our text to be read to new Christians who anticipated coming to the Lord's altar for the Eucharist. So which altar is it? Both. The Old Testament altar and liturgy pointed forward to and is fulfilled in Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross and his presence in the Sacrament of the Altar.

Today, Jesus directs our attention to the altar in the front of this sanctuary. He is talking about the Divine Liturgy of Word and Sacrament, in which the beautiful ritual flow is suddenly interrupted: ***“Leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”***

Leave our gift and first be reconciled. The idea of being reconciled is nothing new especially for us as Christians. Christ mission was one of reconciliation.

He came to reconcile us to our heavenly Father. So, reconciliation is very important in this life so we can have the gift of new life in heaven together with our heavenly Father. Our reconciliation is an element of salvation that refers to the results of atonement.

Reconciliation is the end of the estrangement, caused by original sin, between God and humanity. God is the author and Christ is the agent and we are the ambassadors of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians)

Two elements shape the meaning of Jesus' words for us today: liturgy and anger. Some things never change. Matthew 5 deals with "worship wars," but not the war between traditional and contemporary worship styles. Jesus is talking about the wars that go on among brothers who come together to worship and expect to receive the reconciling body and blood of the Christ in the Lord's Supper while they harbor anger and resentment toward one another.

It is dangerous to go to the liturgy, worship service when we are angry. More specifically, it is dangerous to go to the altar when we are angry.

Forgiving others or asking others to forgive us is not optional for those who desire to come to the Lord's Supper. We are to reconcile with each other first.

Sin and anger against others are an unavoidable part of life in this fallen world, especially among those who are closest to us. Many family dinners have been disrupted by anger and cruel words. Hurt feelings, hatred, and bitterness can last for hours or even days. But then comes Sunday, and the family is again invited over to the Lord's house for the family dinner. Do we continue the feud, or do we reconcile?

It is a dangerous thing to approach the altar with someone with whom you refuse to be reconciled. To despise someone at the altar into whom the Lord has put his body and blood is to despise the Lord's body and blood. One of the oldest liturgical manuals was written about the same time as Matthew's Gospel. In chapter 14, we are warned as a congregation,

“On the Lord’s Day you assemble and break bread. . . . But let no one who has a quarrel with his companion join with you until they have been reconciled” (14:1–2; author’s translation). For this reason, ancient liturgies included the kiss of peace after the Service of the Word, prior to the Service of Holy Communion.

Reconciliation and peace with others must precede reception of the body and blood.

Liturgical revisions of the twentieth century reintroduced this ancient custom into many churches in the form of a handshake or sharing of the peace accompanied by the words, “Peace be with you.” Instead of being understood as serious business, the Peace sometimes degenerates into a confusing cacophony of jolly “good mornings,” hugs, and friendly chitchat. And that is why many churches have stopped this practice. As annoying as this may be to the liturgical purists, there is something far worse that can take place. This is when the Peace is refused or avoided.

You see the offending party in a pew far from you and are relieved that you will not have to exchange the seemingly innocent little phrase, “Peace be with you.” But the full significance of these four little words becomes apparent as they rub up against the bitterness, hurt, and anger. Truth is, after what they’ve done to you, you can muster up not one ounce of love, compassion, and mercy for the two-faced fool. Thankfully, the church is full. We can avoid them by communing at a separate table on our side of the altar and they can commune on their side.

Anyone who has not experienced such feelings has never been stabbed in the back by a smiling, pious brother. When it comes to pastoral practice, it’s a lot easier to do a doctrinal check on the individual’s confession of the real presence than to bring about real reconciliation. Furthermore, an examination of one’s own heart shows that reconciliation is a bloody, hurtful, messy business.

But Jesus tells us, ***“Leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”*** That is what Jesus himself did. He left the temple. Without complaint, he was taken outside Jerusalem to Calvary in order there to reconcile the world to himself by the shedding of his blood. Reconciliation is a bloody, painful business. Jesus then explains, ***“the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”*** (Matthew 20:28).

We should imitate Jesus, whose perfect life and merciful death reconciled the world with himself. But all our imitating will never be enough and never be finished. So, we go on imitating and reconciling. But more important, we give thanks that Jesus left the altar in the temple to reconcile with his brother. We are that brother, and our reconciliation cost him his life. It was a bloody business, but it was perfect, complete, and it is finished. With him, we can now return and offer our gifts. In the name of Jesus.

Amen