

## Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Jun 11th 2015

Memorial of Saint Barnabas, Apostle

Let's celebrate Saint Barnabas by going straight to the Gospel reading, the passage on anger and reconciliation in the first chapter of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. As Barnabas worked on that first mission with St. Paul, he surely took seriously what Paul took seriously, Jesus's teaching on nonviolence and reconciliation.

Jesus uses the fifth commandment as his starting point. "You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, . . ." Jesus makes two significant moves here. One move is obvious: he refers to a much lesser offence, moving from the external act of murder to the internal emotion of anger. The second "move" is that Jesus creates a commandment that is impossible to fulfill literally.

Let me explain. The phrase "liable to judgment" is not a reference to God's judgment but to man's. For the Fifth Commandment is saying that a person who has murdered someone will be tried at the city gates. That is what "liable to judgment" means in ancient Israelite law. So when Jesus says that a person who is angry with "his brother" —a fellow member of the community—will be tried at the city gates, he has created a "mind tease." Imagine going to your attorney and saying, "I want to take my neighbor, George, to court; he's angry with me." Your attorney would surely say, "Has he done anything?" You would have to admit, "Well, no. But I can tell he is ticked off at me just by the way he acts around me. Your lawyer would have to say, "I'm sorry. Until he does something that harms you, you have no case.

When we continue reading that verse I began to quote above (Matt 5:22), it becomes clearer what Jesus is up to: ". . . and whoever says to his brother 'Raca'—which is Aramaic for something like 'Air head!' — will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, . . ." Jesus has moved from the local court to the equivalent of the Supreme Court, and the offence is simply a low-level verbal insult. If we didn't perceive the hyperbole in the first analogy, we can't miss it in the second one.

But there is yet a third stunning image from Jesus: ". . . and whoever says 'You fool!' will be liable to fiery Gehenna." Without leaving the level of the minor offence of trash talk, the punishment has moved to hellfire! If we have listened carefully, we can see that Jesus is using very playful language to make a very serious point: to paraphrase, "Don't think you are keeping the spirit of the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' simply because you have not yet murdered someone. I'm challenging you to a righteousness that surpasses what the Law can touch. Don't even cultivate the inner attitude that could

actually lead to murder. I'm challenging you to manage your anger before it gets dangerous." Is Jesus saying that anger is a sin? Of course not; the angry response to an offence is spontaneous. Where freedom begins to enter the situation is where we decide to go with the anger. We do sin if we cultivate the anger with resentful speech or other action. Jesus is prompting us to address the seed of hostility in our hearts before we nurse its growth into hostile — possibly lethal — action. This requires prayerful attention to our emotional life. The Holy Spirit can heal that dark stuff if we expose it to the light of prayer.

If the hostility we experience gets really aggressive, see Jesus' fifth and sixth teachings, on creative nonviolence and love of enemies, at the end of this chapter of Matthew.

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