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The Daily Challenges of "One Eyed Lefty"

Matthew 5: 17-20

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I'd like everyone to close their right eye for a moment. Keep your eye closed and now take your right hand and put it behind your back. With your eye closed and your hand behind your back, turn to your right and touch the shoulder of the person sitting next to you. It takes a lot of work to keep in contact with someone when you've lost the use of your right eye and your right hand.

At the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount he said, "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."

This week as we continued our Forty Days with Jesus, we were introduced to "One-Eyed Lefty" and, if we're honest, we recognized ourselves. We all commit the sins that Jesus warned us against: anger, lust, deceit, vengeance, hatred. At the beginning of his first sermon, Jesus challenged his followers by setting an ethical standard that is impossible for anyone to meet. But every time we do fail, it is as if an eye has been plucked out and a hand cut off. It becomes very difficult to keep in contact with each other whenever our sins get the best of us.

On the day that my maternal grandmother buried her youngest brother, Emery, Nana decided that it was time to go and visit George. George was the younger brother of Pop Pop, my maternal grandfather. George lived in the small town of Hamburg, Pennsylvania, just a few blocks away from Grammy Savage, my great-grandmother, and around the corner from my Great-uncle Earl, the oldest of Pop Pop's siblings, and his wife aunt Lil.

We used to make the half-hour drive to Hamburg several times a year to visit Grammy Savage and Uncle Earl and Aunt Lil, but I never met Uncle George. In fact, I didn't even know that he existed.

Even today, Hamburg only has about 4000 residents. It is just a little town in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch country in Berks County. It is the kind of town where time seems to stand still. Nothing ever changes very much in Hamburg. The same families have lived there forever and everyone knows everything about everyone. But I never knew anything about my Uncle George. Neither did my brother or my sister or any of my cousins.

Even though Uncle Earl and Aunt Lil never had any children of their own, it was always fun to go and visit them. Right across the street from their house was a huge park with a great baseball diamond and an enormous swing set. My siblings and I could amuse ourselves for hours playing in the park. Uncle Earl owned a trucking company, E.S. Savage Inc. and he had two big garages filled with oil trucks, coal trucks, road graders, and even a charter bus. He would take us out to the garage and let us climb up into the truck cabs and pretend we were driving. I grew up loving the smell of the garage: the grease and oil and solvents. He also had horses that he stabled just a few blocks from his house, and would take us down and lead us around the paddock on horseback.

I have lots of fond memories of visiting my Great-uncle Earl, but none of my Great-uncle George.

Decades before I was born, there had been a terrible argument in Pop Pop's family. Back before the days of health insurance, my great-grandfather became sick and needed to be hospitalized. All of the siblings had agreed to share the expense of their father's health care, but when the bill came due, a dispute developed over the amount that each person was expected to pay. The fighting became so bitter that several of the siblings eventually broke off all contact with each other. They never spoke or visited each other again after that. It was as if they were dead to each other.

We Pennsylvania Dutch can be pretty stubborn. My grandfather's siblings carried on their feud for more than thirty years. But on the way home from burying her own younger brother, Nana decided it was time to set aside the anger and the hurt that had alienated Pop Pop from his younger sibling for most of their adult lives. So they stopped in Hamburg and knocked on George's door and much to their surprise he opened the door and invited them in; and a wonderful reconciliation began that day. I met Uncle George at a party celebrating my grandparent's 50th wedding anniversary. By then George's wife had died and his own health was failing. I saw him one more time shortly after that, at my grandfather's funeral, and then he died a short while later.

If Uncle George had been murdered, even if he had been killed in a crime of passion by someone in our own family, I would have at least known that he existed. I would have learned some of his life stories. I would have known what he did for a living, whether he married and if he had any children. I might even have had a chance to develop relationships with cousins and nephews that I never knew existed.

My grandfather and all of his siblings went to church every Sunday. They honored the Ten Commandments and obeyed them to the letter. They never carried weapons concealed beneath their cloaks waiting for the opportune moment to lash out and commit murder. But they did allow themselves to carry their anger, concealed beneath a pleasant exterior, for more than thirty years.

Anger is a more insidious form of violence than murder. It doesn't just kill people, it obliterates them. In my grandfather's family, it erased any evidence of the other's existence, even while they were living blocks away from each other in the same small town. An entire generation of our family grew up without any knowledge of each other.

Anger is extremely violent. We can feel it in our bodies. When we are angry, our bodies are poised for combat; our muscles are tense, our teeth are clenched, and our hearts are racing. Anger transforms our entire outlook and has a dehumanizing effect on the way we view others. The people we are angry with stop being real people with feelings and issues of their own. They stop being people with interesting stories and histories, and instead become problems that need to be eliminated.

We like to make a big deal over the Ten Commandments. We venerate them as if they are the gold standard by which we conduct our lives. We like to believe that the Ten Commandments are the building blocks of our great nation. People constantly want to erect monuments in courthouses and public parks with the Ten Commandments engraved on stone tablets because we pride ourselves in being a nation founded on Judeo-Christian values.

But today we heard Jesus reminding us that for Christians, it is not just about obeying the commandments, it is about fulfilling them. The commandments only point us towards the righteousness of God. Following Jesus takes us beyond obeying the requirements of the laws, and commits us to honoring the intention of the laws.

This week we've been meditating on some of the most challenging passages of scripture. In the fifth chapter of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus re-interprets the laws of Moses and sets a standard of ethical behavior that is so high that none of us can possibly attain it.

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder and anyone who 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."

"First be reconciled." That is the righteousness of God that the commandment points us toward.

We can't prevent ourselves from getting angry and making insulting and disparaging comments about the people we are angry at. Sometimes our anger gets the best of us. But we cannot allow our anger to keep the best of us. The best of us always belongs with reconciliation. "First be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." Amen.