

Jesus said, ““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.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

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Our ability to reflect on ourselves is a defining characteristic of the human person. And that capacity for reflection can be developed only in interaction with other people. Ironically, the first movement involves turning inward; to search within ourselves by following the mystical, interior pathway of silent contemplation until we discover the divine reality within ourselves.

Lingering here, however, creates the risk of becoming self-involved. Complacent. Inaccessible. Many years ago, a group of us were on a call with a very perceptive pandit. One student on the call announced rather excitedly, “I have achieved enlightenment!” “That’s great!” the teacher said, “Now, get over yourself!”

After the call, some people criticized the exchange as too harsh. Rude. Too easily misunderstood. And maybe it could have been handled differently.

Maybe.

I doubt it would have had the intended impact.

Listen again to Matthew's Jesus: "...if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire...everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery...If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out...if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off..." Jesus could have rephrased this somewhat harsh and easily misunderstood lesson from the Sermon on the Mount.

I doubt it would have had the intended impact.

The path of self-discovery toward the divine light within involves a process of dropping away everything that is not the deepest, highest self at the center of our being. While the details differ for each of us, the path requires patience, perseverance and practice. The difficulty of the process led Tibetan Buddhist master Chögyam Trungpa to warn: "If you are not on the path, don't get on it!"

And *finding* the divine light within is not even half of the process.

Now, we can always *return* to the silence of contemplation to be reinvigorated. And yet, once the silence has filled us, it urges us out and beyond ourselves; it compels us into action to serve the spark of divinity in each other. We cross a line or as Benedictine Fr. Bruno Barnhart wrote, "a boundary within us where thought becomes fire."

Our baptisms prepare us to awaken to the unifying love of God poured into us by the Spirit. And the Eucharist energizes us by communion not only with God, but also with one another and with all creation.

We no longer simply *watch* God's creating activity around us. We no longer worship God only beyond us, aware only of that aspect of God that is utterly other than us. We begin, instead, to *participate* in the divine nature as God's servants, or as St. Paul described to the church in Corinth, as God's field, God's building. Our bodies, our souls and minds, become one small part of the movement of all creation coming into right relationship with God.

"So," Matthew's Jesus teaches, "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."

The movement into our deepest selves and back out beyond ourselves provides a pattern for reconciliation. Evil can spread when we allow other people or life circumstances to make us feel the worst about who we are. Once that has taken root, we start to see only the worst in those around us and in what is happening around us.

Options begin to open when we remember that we are God's own beloved children; that we, the sisters and brothers of Jesus, are loved unconditionally, flaws, poor choices, bad habits and all. When we can reconnect to the *best* of who we are, when we see ourselves as God does, in the most generous light possible, we can have that behind our eyes when we look at others and the situations we find ourselves in.

We can become generous, loving advocates for each other. Even in the most trying circumstances, we can offer hope for a better future and the potential for forgiveness.

With practice, that same pattern leads to wholeness in many ways. We learn to drop away our identification with anything that we can observe. We have bodies, but we are not our bodies only. We have emotions, but we are not our emotions. We have thoughts and roles; we have wounds and accomplishments, disappointments and dreams.

These are parts of who we are, but they do not define us. We know because we can watch them, we can witness them.

And the more we drop away of what we can *observe* about ourselves, the more we become aware of awareness itself. In this way, we learn to see through what St. Bonaventure called the three eyes.

Through the "eye of flesh", we gather information about the world of space and time, and of objects. Through the "eye of reason", we collect knowledge about philosophy, theology and of the mind itself, as well as images of God. Through the "eye of contemplation" at the still, silent center of our being, we gain wisdom about transcendent realities *beyond* sense and reason; we witness the Divine Ultimate itself.

From this witness perspective, we ripen for inner changes that will show up in new behaviors. We reflect on what drives our moods, our motivations and our actions. And then we can make decisions.

We discover how anger tends to arise in us and we learn to experience it as information that advises without directing our actions. We learn to distinguish joyful attraction to beauty from misdirected

fantasy expressions of lust so that we can choose appropriate responses. We become increasingly capable of navigating our own needs and perspectives without disregarding the needs and perspectives of those around us.

From the silence of the witness within us, we learn to touch the depth of our senses, our feelings and our thoughts so that they can be brought forward in wholeness rather than in defense or an impulse to control. Because who we are as followers of Christ is never only about us as individuals. We are followers of Christ in community.

As we experience God not only within each *one* of us, but with *us* as practitioners in a community, we become more than members of a group. We discover that we shape and are shaped by this community. We accept an accountability, a responsibility, to each other and to the people we encounter in the larger community.

The Jewish teachings that Jesus refers to were given by God as a gift. The teachings are a gift of love to help us serve God within us, God who transcends us and God who is in our midst. God gave these teachings to the children of Israel *after* claiming them as God's people, not as a means to *become* God's people. And so, the invitation from Moses to "choose life" is an encouragement to joyful practice rather than an stern order to follow rules.

God gave the gift of the teachings to strengthen community. The word "you" in both Deuteronomy and Matthew is plural. The teachings help to create and sustain communities in which all of God's children can find a place where they can become increasingly whole, and give the gifts that God planted in them. Anything that destroys or diminishes can be "thrown away" because it is not who we truly are.

Once we dissolve the attachment of non-essential distractions from our sense of who we are, we can learn from the "eye of contemplation," from Jesus and the saints, from the Torah and the rabbis. And what we see consistently through them all is that the way to create our own best life is to serve the best life of our neighbor.

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