

Practicing Resurrection
A Different Way of Disagreeing
Matthew 5:21-26

I have often thought that my college education was embarrassingly short on the study of literature. I was reminded of that recently when I learned—did you know this?—that *A Christmas Carol*, that classic story of Scrooge and Tiny Tim and the ghosts of Christmas past and Christmas present, was actually one of *five* Christmas stories written by Charles Dickens. Only one became famous, but all five of them are about the surprising power of goodness and grace to change the direction of human life. Dickens lived in 19th century industrialized England, and what he saw when he looked around him was a flat, dark landscape, stained by coal dust and greed. The Christmas story was one of few things powerful enough to lift his despair about life in that time. And so he wrote not just one, but five stories about the spirit of Christmas.

I read one of those stories this week—a story called *The Battle of Life*. It takes place in a country village built on the site of an old battlefield, a place that once was filled with sorrow. Thousands of men and horses lost their lives in a war whose cause no one remembers. They were buried in that field; and for generations afterward, you could find in the soil traces of metal armor and bridles, and even bones. But over time, those remnants of death got buried deeper and deeper. The people built their houses and plowed fields right on top of the field. They forgot what had happened there. Stone cottages and rose-covered trellises now stood on top of unmarked graves. Children played on the very site of the battle, unconscious of the pain the soil still held.

Conscious or not, though, the people had inherited the earth's cycle of war and death. The story is about one family that lives in this village. No mother; just a father and two daughters. The father, a physician, loves his children. He's not unkind, but he is deeply cynical. No matter what happens, his response is always a dismissive, hopeless laugh. To him, life is ridiculous, an absurd and meaningless joke. Nothing surprises him. To him the world is senseless; its patterns are set; nothing will change.

The two daughters are Grace and Marion. The older one, Grace, loves and takes care of her younger sister selflessly, like a mother. Grace is the responsible older child. There's nothing in the story that leads us to expect much happiness or beauty for her. It's the younger daughter, Marion, who is the apple of everyone's eye. She is beautiful and charming, doted on by her family, admired by many men. Two children: the older one dutiful, the younger overly-gifted, a little irresponsible. Sound familiar? We know this story. We know how this will go. We know what prodigal children like Marion always do with their lavish gifts.

Like all of Dickens' writing, this story is also a commentary on social class. So there's a character who is the maid to this family. She is awkward, ugly and illiterate. Her name is Clemency Newcome; and so right from the beginning, her name identifies her with mercy and forgiveness. She's so unattractive, even the carriage man can't imagine choosing her when he thinks about a suitable marriage partner. But she is the carrier of wisdom—sort of the Tiny Tim

character in this story. In the big pockets of her apron, among lots of other junk, she carries two things inscribed with the only words she can read. One is a thimble that says “Forget and forgive.” The other is a nutmeg grater. It has carved into its silver “Do as you would be done by.”

All through the story, there are echoes of Jesus’ prodigal son story. The younger daughter, impulsive and headstrong, follows her heart. She runs off with the suitor who you know is bad news. Her father is broken-hearted; but he is not surprised. Disappointment for him is muscle memory. Grace, the older daughter, who thought she would live her whole life standing at her beautiful sister’s side, patches her own life back together. They do what they must; their lives will go on, but the light in their family has been snuffed out.

Only Clemency’s life goes on evenly through the whole story, as if there’s something about her that protects her from the full weight of the world’s disappointments. Maybe she’s just too simple to notice. She lives by the words on that thimble and nutmeg grater, and they serve her well. She does end up with the carriage man who has condescended to marry someone as plain as Clemency. Together they make a good life. Her generosity and hospitality and sweet temper make it good.

The rest of them just go on. And then, after many years, something happens that rewrites the story of this family. The younger daughter returns home, and she brings with her a grace that breaks in and surprises this family. It shatters the sadness they had resigned themselves to. It breaks a chain of disappointment and sorrow that had soaked into them and formed the invisible story of their lives. I’m not going to tell you the whole story, because I want you to have the delight of reading it for yourself. You can get it for free on Kindle.

But I will tell you that this becomes a story of conversion. The father’s eyes are opened, and he sees something he could never see before. “It’s a world full of hearts,” he says, this cynic who had thought there was nothing new there, nothing worth his wonder. “...A world of sacred mysteries. Only its Creator knows what lies beneath the surface of what we see.” Awe. Wonder. Grace.

Not one part of this story happens at Christmas. But it is one of Charles Dickens’ Christmas stories, because Christmas too is the story of grace breaking into human life. In every one of those five stories, Dickens was illustrating the extraordinary power of love to shatter patterns of despair that people in every age learn to live with and expect. Grace—undeserved and unexpected love—disrupts the vicious cycles that *always* bring conflict and loss. It’s even more powerful than the certainty that people will betray and hurt each other again and again and again because...they just will.

I’m telling you a Christmas story in the month of May because this story—about the power of grace to disrupt our unconscious, self-defeating, endlessly harmful cycles—is what Jesus was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount.

Last week we talked about the Beatitudes, the graceful way of being that’s possible when you know that God is in this life with you. Today we’re talking about another part of Jesus’ most

important sermon; the part that scholars call the *antitheses*. Jesus begins a whole bunch of sentences in his sermon with the words “You have heard it said...” He repeats a lesson or law that his listeners would have known from the religious tradition of their childhood. Don’t commit murder. Don’t commit adultery. This is what divorce requires. And then he follows that lesson with the words, “But I say to you...” In every one of these contrasts—*antitheses*—Jesus tells his listeners—tells us—that by the time you get to the point where you might have broken the law, you’re already lost in a cycle of anger or broken relationship or isolation. A law might help you toe the line, but it’s too late for real healing. ‘I haven’t come to tell you how to avoid breaking the law,’ Jesus is saying. ‘I’ve come to break the cycles that got you here.’ That’s what will change your life.

Just like the Beatitudes, I think we’ve often misinterpreted this part of Jesus’ sermon. We’ve read it as if he was laying out some high ideal for human behavior, some way of being spiritual that, if it weren’t so impossible to practice, might lift us out of the difficulties of being human.

You have heard it said...Don’t commit murder, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment.

Was Jesus saying ‘Don’t ever get angry’? I don’t think so. Anger is a normal part of human life. It’s often a useful emotion. Anger is like a thermometer, a signal to us that something is wrong—sometimes out there in the world, and sometimes inside of us. It’s impossible, maybe it’s even unhealthy, never to get angry. Jesus was telling us what to do with our anger. He knew that unrecognized, unnamed, unresolved anger is dangerous. It will destroy you, and it can lead you to destroy others. When you’re angry, he said, when something sends off that alarm in your body, do something about it before it becomes a destructive, hurt-seeking force inside of you. Forgiveness is what your body and your heart are telling you you’re hungry for. Go make peace with the person who has made you angry. Reconcile with the person you have upset. Do it now, before that cycle spins out of control.

In these few weeks after Easter, we’ve been trying to look at the Sermon on the Mount with a new perspective, trying to see it with the eyes of Jesus followers who would now know that Jesus’ life wasn’t just about triumph; that it included every part of human life, death too. I think maybe they knew then what we know now: that we’re just people. We live in a messy, broken, sometimes anger-inspiring world.

Apparently Jesus, God-with-us, didn’t come to change that. What he did come to change is our sense that we’re stuck. Anger does not have to fester into violence; stressed relationships don’t have to keep fraying until they break. You are not trapped, Jesus was saying. *This* faith is not *karma*: a belief that your life is already written, that humans are hard-wired for sorrow and conflict. No matter how mired you feel in anger, or worry, or your sureness that the people in charge will never get it right—in *this* faith, something else is possible. If we let it, a mighty love might just break in and change everything.

In Jesus, God brought us a story of grace. Grace strong enough to break in to our lives even when we have stopped looking for it, even when the blood of old battlefields has seeped into the

soles of our feet. It's a grace that moves straight toward anger and lying and hurt that seem to repeat like an endless, hopeless loop. Grace powerful enough to rewrite the story. Your story. My story. Every story.