

## Sermon on Matthew 5:21-26

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*Part three of our summer sermon series on Allen Hilton's A House United*

Good morning! It's good to be able to bring the message today. This is my first sermon at First Presbyterian since 1994. It's part three of our summer sermon series on Allen Hilton's thought-provoking book, *A House United*. If you haven't read it yet, I recommend it for its observations about our divided American society and for his ideas on how the church can make a difference.

So, who here remembers Walter Cronkite? I'm betting most of you who are a bit younger than those who raised their hands know who he was: the most trusted man in America. Walter Cronkite was the anchor on CBS Evening News for 19 years, from 1962-1981. In those days, before cable TV and streaming videos and social media, everyone got their news either from the local newspapers or from one of three television channels. Or from news broadcasts on a limited number of radio stations.

Back then, the Federal Communications Commission enforced a Fairness Doctrine. For four decades from 1949 through 1987, in order to obtain a license to broadcast, a station was required to discuss important issues on the air, and to represent conflicting views on the issue in the way they aired it. Americans all heard the same stations, and they all heard balanced presentations on controversial issues. The next day at the water cooler or around the kitchen table, people could talk about what they'd learned and perhaps discuss their varying views.

Things have changed. As Dr. Hilton points out, a series of court decisions softening the FCC Fairness Doctrine led to its repeal in 1987. Radio stations led the way in partisan broadcasts, beginning with Rush Limbaugh and his entertaining conservative diatribes. Eventually progressive voices started airing their views on their own stations.

Network television joined the fray with a 60 Minutes segment called “Point/Counterpoint.” Other network stations followed suit. Viewers could see representatives of the right and the left disagreeing with each other loudly. It sure was entertaining. Before long CNN offered a free-standing show called *Crossfire* with Pat Buchanan on the right and Tom Braden on the left. And with the advent of cable TV, before long we had entire channels airing just one point of view.

Dr. Hilton puts it this way:

*On both radio and television, the earthshaking differences between our recent Fox and MSNBC partisan screeds and their late-twentieth-century “Point/Counterpoint” forebears, came when voices from Left and Right no longer shouted at one another in the same room— or on the same channel. The archconservative and bleeding-heart liberal no longer perform before a mixed political audience. Instead, in our time, conservative pundits play to a conservative ideal viewer, and liberal talking heads fling it to their liberal target audience. Engaged (though showy) debate has devolved into two separate pep rallies.*

This means that viewers and listeners now choose their news. We only have to listen to commentators who agree with us. Along with promoting the right or left side, we get denigration of the opposing side. Those people must be misguided, or stupid, or evil. And so many issues of our day get this treatment: abortion, immigration, gun control, foreign policy, health care, welfare, homelessness, and so on. Each opposing position is characterized in the worst possible way. How could somebody believe that?

The Internet amplifies the echo chamber. As Dr. Hilton points out, social media algorithms now feed you a steady stream of whichever political view you’ve expressed. You liked that, so you’ll probably like this, too. And so we grow further and further to one extreme or the other, without having to listen to people who disagree.

Here's another quote from Allen Hilton. (Keep in mind this was published in 2018, so some personalities listed here are no longer with us. Nonetheless, the divisiveness has gotten worse):

*Hank, our conservative banker, starts his day with a news feed that offers him Bill Kristol's Weekly Standard column, Charles Karuthammer's Washington Post piece, and some more sensational bits from Breitbart. The radio in his Escalade is set to the local Limbaugh station, so his 45-minute commute fortifies him for today's conversations. He arrives at a workplace that has been "coincidentally" stocked with employees from his political herd, so lunchtime conversation provides a stage for those Limbaugh lines and a few choice comments about the Democrats' latest atrocity—all to the approving amens of his colleagues. On the way home, he hits the gym, where his earbuds hitch him to Fox News on the screen above his treadmill. When he gets home, he hunkers down for some Hannity on the way to bed. Sunday morning, he'll hear a sermon on the evils of politicians and entertainers who are conspiring to stamp out Christianity.*

*Heather, our tech executive, lives the same day in an opposite way. She eats breakfast while reading Gail Collins or Paul Krugman in the New York Times, and greets her recycling neighbors from a homogeneously liberal neighborhood as she climbs into her Prius. A Rachel Maddow podcast serenades her commute before she joins a water cooler conversation that retells the latest Saturday Night Live Trump slam or a riff from Bill Maher or John Oliver on the Republicans. At lunchtime, her newsfeed throws her Vox or Huffington Post, then she catches MSNBC on the screen above her rowing machine. Sunday's sermon will condemn global warming with the urgent tone Hank's church uses about terrorism.*

That last bit is because most of our churches are divided as well. People shopping for a church find one that feels comfortable, which often means it has like-minded people who express comfortably similar points of view. These are likely to include suspicion or downright condemnation of Christians of the opposite side of the spectrum: the judgmental Evangelicals on the right or the judgmental Progressives on the left. Instead of calling for reconciliation, American Christians on both sides are throwing gasoline on the fire.

Some churches are wonderfully diverse, not only by age and gender and race and income level, but also by political orientation. Our church is one of these, which is why we may be in an ideal position to help bring opposing sides together.

But what news do we consume at home? How do we feel about people from the opposing party? According to research by the Pew Research Center, both Republicans and Democrats have increased dramatically in the opinion that members of the opposing party are closed minded, unintelligent, dishonest and immoral. The anger and outrage boils over.

In this context, let's take a look at our Scripture for the day, Matthew 5: 21-26. This is from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, a lengthy message on righteous living, preached early in his ministry.

*21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. '22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister[\_will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool! 'will be in danger of the fire of hell.*

*23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.*

*25 "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.*

Let's unpack this. First, note that "Raca" is an Aramaic term of contempt. You can substitute a derogatory curse word of your choice. Saying that to someone for whom Christ died is a big-time sin.

Also, the term translated "brother or sister" refers to a fellow disciple. In other words, fellow Christians. Being angry with them is akin to murder.

Now put this in the context of today's American political discourse. We are fed a steady stream of outrage. That's what keeps us tuned in to the channel or website or social media stream: outrage over whatever we're being told the other side is saying and doing.

Jesus is not a fan of outrage. Yes, he did overturn the tables of the money changers in the temple. He even went after them with a whip. So there's room for righteous anger over injustice, especially over those who oppress the poor. But when anger is directed at another Christian? Usually what we call righteous anger is really just being upset with people who disagree with us. And Jesus classifies it with murder.

Just before this passage, Jesus has stated that our righteousness must be greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees. To the listeners of his day, that would seem a tall order. Scribes and Pharisees put themselves out there as the pinnacle of holiness. But, as Florida Bible teacher Brent Kercheville points out, they were actually teaching and practicing a watered-down version of the law. Have I murdered anyone? No? I'm good.

Jesus begins each section in the last part of Matthew 5 with "You have heard that it is said," rather than "It is written." That is, this is what the scribes and Pharisees have been teaching: you shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But Jesus declares he has come to fulfill the Law, which all along has had a higher standard. In Leviticus 19, the Law reads, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."

We see this echoed in I John 3:15: “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him“ Tough words. Likewise, listen to this passage from the first chapter of James: “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

What to do about all this anger and hatred? Jesus calls for reconciliation. Later on in our Matthew 5 passage for today, Jesus gives an example. Suppose you have traveled a long way to make an offering at the temple. Once there, however, you remember the simmering feud with a brother or sister back home. Stop right there! Jesus says leave your gift in front of the altar, go all the way back and be reconciled to the one who’s hurting, and then return to offer the gift. Don’t even think about worshipping God when you’re harboring hatred and anger in your heart.

Can we Christians get past the anger and hatred in our divided nation? Allen Hilton contends that we can. The first step is genuine relationships with some of those we think are so bad. It’s hard to be a racist, for example, if you’ve spent time really getting to know a few of the people who’ve been targets of your hate. Likewise, instead of listening only to voices in our preferred echo chamber, how about sometimes tuning in to one of those other channels? Or reading columns by people we might not agree with?

Hilton wonders how it were be if the computer algorithms that feed us social media posts were quite different from the current ones, which assume that if you liked this, you’d probably like more of the same. He writes,

*Imagine a different starting point. Can you picture an algorithm that expects consumers and voters to welcome challenges and variety instead of echo chambers and pep rallies? Like a nutritionist prescribing a good protein-carbohydrate balance, our new logarithm would detect what’s missing in our news diet and suggest supplements. “Your last six articles have been E.J. Dionne. It’s about time to read some Krauth.” “You’ve loaded up on Hannity long enough. A moment with Maddow wouldn’t*

*hurt.” Imagine if the sorting mechanisms were designed to challenge our tastes and convictions and widen our intake, rather than affirming and bolstering them and narrowing our world. Imagine a news feed designed to expose us to a wide range of opinions and cut into biases.”*

However unlikely that may be, we are free to broaden our reading and viewing ourselves.

And what about personal relationships? Dr. Hilton writes about Courageous Conversations he has hosted between people intentionally chosen for their widely divergent political beliefs. When people truly listen to each other, with mutual respect and love, the anger fades away. How can First Presbyterian take the lead in facilitating these conversations? Can we help bridge the divide here in Missoula?

As we move further into election season, let's be mindful of our own news sources and our own assumptions about people on the opposing side. Let's reach out to those who differ from us. Let's release the anger and speak to and about others with love.