

251 Making A Memorial

(Note: This blog entry is based on the text "Making A Memorial", originally shared on February 10, 2023. It was the 251st video for our YouTube Channel, Streams of Living Water (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB7KnYS1bpHKaL2OseQWCnw>), co-produced with my wife, Rev. Sally Welch.)

What do impossible expectations have to do with building a public memorial after a horrific local event? More than you might think. Today, we're going to find out.

We are now almost three weeks from the mass shooting on January 21st in Monterey Park, where I've been serving part time and temporarily since last June. It was an event that has been repeated dozens of times in communities all over our country. Sally and I recorded a video of response and reflection near some Happy Lunar New Year banners the first week, in front the Star Dance Studio, the site of the murders, the week before last, and this week in front of the growing memorial at the Monterey Park Civic Center, where I attended a vigil two days after the shootings.

There have been calls for a permanent memorial. You know there are going to be a lot of strongly held opinions on what to construct!

How do we memorialize something that was so traumatic and disheartening for a local community? I think that there is something that we can learn from Jesus' sermon on the mount, and it begins by focusing on what points us to life.

Sally and I watched the Grammy's last Sunday, the awards ceremony of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. There were many great performances and inspiring speeches. There was also one cheap attention grab involving the devil and various obscenities, and the subsequent mockery of Christian sensibilities. It worked. It drew mainstream publicity and pearl-clutching responses.

My reaction? No one is beyond redemption. No one. Except, maybe, those who think that they don't need redemption.

That is the message of reconciliation in the Bible text we're going to look at today, in another section from Jesus' Sermon on The Mount, in **Matthew 5:21-37**,

It starts with **verses 21-26**,

²¹"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' ²²But 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. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come 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. ²⁶Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

We are reminded to remember that we also were separated from God by our Sin, and were reconciled to God by God's grace, before we judge others.

The Christian practice of the "Passing of the Peace" is based partially on these words. It's not just a friendly, "Hello."

When we say "Peace be with you" to one another, we are saying, "We're good", and that we are reconciled with one another.

Those words are preceded by the pastor saying to the whole congregation, "The peace of the Lord be with you always," and the congregation replying, "And also with you".

We say that we recognize that we are reconciled with one another because we are first reconciled to God by Jesus Christ on the cross.

We have no fear of Sin, Death, or the power of the forces that defy God.

We are made righteous by the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Nothing, not community trauma, not unexpected evil, not even death, can take that away.

Everything we do is a response to the love of God in Jesus Christ, not an attempt to earn it.

Last week, we mentioned the Pharisees. They were laymen who devoted their lives to knowing God's law and keeping it. They were highly admired, and Jesus was always knocking heads with them. Why?

It was because they had confused the spirit of the Law with the letter of the Law.

It was because they believed that keeping the letter of the Law made them righteous, and they looked at anyone who was not keeping the letter of the Law as not righteous.

It was because their knowledge of the Law led them to look for loopholes that would enable them to appear to keep the Law, while not keeping it.

They were like the little boy who went into the kitchen just before dinner and asked his mother if he could have a piece of cake. "No," she said. "You'll spoil your appetite."

The mother left the kitchen for a minute, and when she came back she found her little boy eating cookies."

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Eating cookies," he said. "You said that I couldn't eat cake. But you didn't say that I couldn't eat cookies."

The letter of the law was, "Don't eat the cake." The spirit of it was, "You'll spoil your appetite."

The Pharisees had missed the purpose of God's Law.

Jesus continues making this point with **verses 27-32**,

²⁷"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If 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. ³⁰And 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. ³¹"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'³²But 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.

Jesus said that questions concerning how to keep the letter of the Law, or looking for loopholes in it, are entirely beside the point.

Jesus is saying that our need isn't learning how to escape punishment by looking for loopholes. Our need is for knowing that we have a Savior in Jesus Christ.

That knowledge is the greatest memorial gift we can give to our community, because it doesn't point backwards. It points to our present life and to our future life. It points to life!

Even sinful thoughts that others don't see are still sin, Jesus says.

All have sinned and fallen short.

I used to ask my confirmation students, when teaching about Sin, "How would you like to have a TV screen over your head that showed what you were thinking all day?" No? We all sin, even when others think we don't. God sees the heart.

We all need redemption. We all need to be reconciled to God. We all need a savior. And all who receive Jesus in faith have one.

This is so important that Jesus uses the common middle eastern rhetorical device of showing that a statement is extremely important by using extreme examples. Otherwise, there would be a lot of one-eyed, one-handed people in this world. We all need redemption. We all need to be reconciled to God. We all need a savior. And all who receive Jesus in faith have one.

There was a controversy in Jesus' day over the circumstances under which a divorce was acceptable under God's Law. The experts taught everything from "She burned my toast," to "She had an affair." In any case, only men could get a divorce, except under very specific circumstances. Jesus said that it's not about finding loopholes. We all need redemption. We all need to be reconciled to God. We all need a savior. And all who receive Jesus in faith have one, and live in response to the gift we have been given in Jesus Christ.

Jesus gives one more set of teachings to make this point, in **verses 33-37**,

³³"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.'³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Jesus makes the Law even harder to keep than the Pharisees did, in order to turn our hearts away from self-righteousness and toward trust in God.

My two brothers and my sister and I had a sibling Zoom call the other day with a nephew who is working on a family history. Our subject for that call was what we remembered about our grandparents and great-grandparents on both sides of our family.

A story one of my brothers told that I had forgotten, if I ever knew it, came up when we were talking about my paternal grandmother's church quilting group.

The group met every Saturday morning in her and my grandfather's home.

One time, a woman approached her and asked if the group would make a quilt for her. She would be happy to pay for it.

My grandmother said that the group really only did quilts for the church .

The woman persisted and finally my grandmother said that she would personally make one for the woman. My brother said that he didn't know if there was any money paid, but the quilt was made. And that would have been the end of the story.

Except that, not long after, the County Fair was held in our town, and there were contests for things like making pickles, and pies, and pictures. And quilts.

The woman had entered the quilt that my grandmother made as if it were one that the woman had made herself. And she won a blue ribbon!

And my grandmother saw it.

How would you have handled that?

That story reminded me of a popular Evangelical writer and preacher who was at a conference where a pastor had delivered one of his published sermons as if it were his own. Afterwards, the writer/preacher approached the pastor and said, "I liked your sermon. But I liked it better when I preached it myself." 😊

How can we escape Sin? We cannot. But the Good News that we have to share is that God brings us out of the sin of our past. We have a Savior who makes all things new! The Christian life then follows in living that new life. We memorialize that newness of life by living it, and by telling others about everything that God has done for us!

I understand that there's a football game on TV this coming Sunday. I've heard that it's "The Superbowl", though it can't be a **super** bowl if the Green Bay Packers aren't playing. At least, that's my standard for a Super Bowl. 😊

What is the standard for reconciliation with God?

I once heard Nicky Gumbel, the founder of the international Alpha Course for making disciples, describe this by asking his audience to look at a wall and imagine the worst person they could think of at the bottom of the wall and the best person they could think of at the top of the wall. "Now," he asked, "Where on that wall would you put yourself?"

Most people, he said, put themselves somewhere in the middle. Then he said, "The problem is that God's standard isn't the top of the wall. God's standard is the sky."

Who can reach that standard? No one. No one but Jesus. And because he gave his life on the cross, we can live with him forever. We who have been reborn from death to life in baptism and by the gift of faith bring a message of hope and redemption to those we know who are living in a disheartened world.

The local memorial to be associated with an event that has been so traumatic and disheartening for us is us. It is lives lived for the reason they were created, for a living relationship with the one true living God..

That is true for us, it is true for our communities, and it is true for our churches.

I believe that God gives every part of the Church, everything we need to accomplish everything God has called on us to do. What has God called, equipped, and sent us to do? That is our only question? How will we accomplish it? Jesus is our answer.

We need redemption. We need to be reconciled to God. We need a savior. And all who receive Him have one in Jesus Christ, and sharing our stories of faith in the transformational power of God is how we make a lasting memorial to life here in Monterey Park and throughout the world.

