

*Matthew 5: Jesus’ “Sermon On the Mount”*

*“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.*

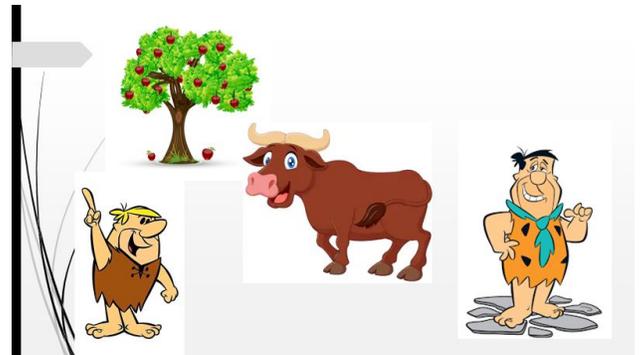
*“So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”*

*“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.”*

So there’s this guy. Let’s call him Fred. Fred is a solid, upstanding citizen. Fred had a farm, and on that farm he had an ox.

One day, through no fault of Fred’s, the ox got loose and wandered off. As it happened, the ox wandered over to an apple orchard owned by Fred’s neighbour, we’ll call him Barney. And Fred’s ox was hungry, so he ate some apples. And then more apples. Until he had pretty much finished off every last apple on Barney’s prized, award-winning apple tree.

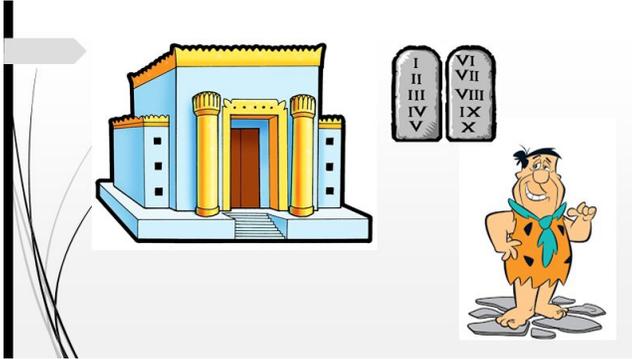
And that’s where Fred found him, happily head-butting the now rather sad-looking tree, attempting to dislodge the few remaining apples that were out of his reach.



Fred was horrified. He knew what this tree meant to Barney. But he also knew that Barney was in town that day, selling some of his other produce at the market. And he’d heard Barney complaining just last week that he’d spotted wild deer roaming the orchard and was worried that they were going to target his prize-winning apple tree next.

So Fred decided to just take his ox home and see if Barney ever complained. No need to create unnecessary tensions between them over apples that the deer probably really were going to eat soon anyway... So Fred took his ox home, and Barney never found out what had really happened.

But Fred felt guilty. He felt bad for Barney, and he felt uncomfortable around him for several weeks. And he knew that the Law made him responsible for the actions of his ox. So, this being ancient Israel, Fred went to the Temple in Jerusalem.



According to the Law of Moses, there was a simple solution to Fred's problem. Sacrifice. In this case, simple accidental property damage, all Fred had to do was go to the Temple and pay a fine equivalent to the losses that his ox had caused\* (see Exodus 22). Pay the fine, and his conscience would be clean and he could go back to being a solid, upstanding citizen.

Now let's pause there for a second. This is an imaginative example of the story that Jesus is telling in Matthew 5.

*"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."*

The original text gets a bit lost in translation, because we don't have the cultural equivalent of the Hebrew Law or the Sanhedrin courts.

In Jesus' time, for the Jews, the Sanhedrin were the judges and governors and religious leaders all in one. Not unlike the ayatollahs in Shia Islam in modern Iran, or maybe the bishops in Mennonite colonies in the not-so-distant past. The Sanhedrin enforced the laws, settled disputes, and represented the judgments of God in the community.

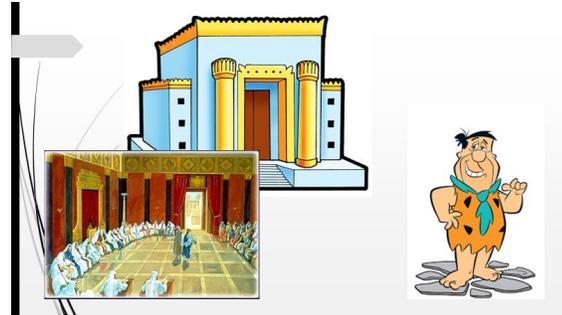
In Jesus' day, each city in Judea and Galilee had a Lesser Sanhedrin council of 23 judges made up of priests, lawyers and representatives of prominent local families. And in Jerusalem was the Greater Sanhedrin, with 71 judges acting as a supreme court making decisions on behalf of all Jews everywhere.



In those days, if you wanted justice, you went to the Sanhedrin. I suppose you could also appeal to the higher authority of the Roman-backed King Herod or the regional Roman governor, but the Romans really weren't interested in the daily lives of the Jewish people, as long as the taxes were paid and the revolutions were quelled.

So when Jesus is talking in the Sermon on the Mount about judgment and councils and courts, he's talking about the Sanhedrin.

And when Fred goes to the Temple to assuage his guilt by giving his sin offering, that's a system run by the Sanhedrin. The temple and the supreme court in the same building. Prayers and sacrifices over here, judges and juries over here.



So the word translated here as “gift” or sometimes “offering” is really more of a fine or a tax. It's non-optional. When Jesus healed a person with leprosy in Matthew chapter 8, he tells him to “go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded.” A gift that is commanded isn't really a gift, now is it? The gift was the fee required to gain entry back into society.

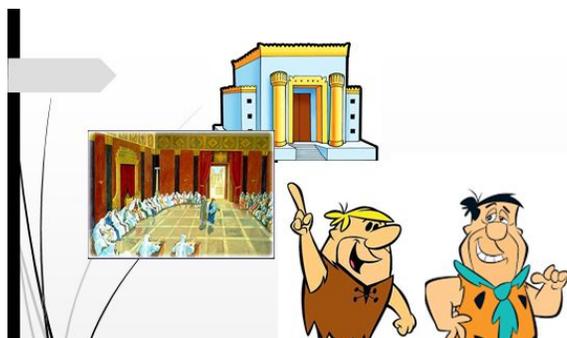
Same word here: Jesus is describing an obligatory fee being paid at the Temple altar. This isn't the joyful giving of the Wildwood offering bags. This was how you maintained your social status with your neighbours as well as your spiritual status with God. And more, this was how Society maintained God's blessing. If you wanted God's favour, to have a peaceful and orderly society, you faithfully paid your fees and brought your “gifts” to the altar.

So the scene that Jesus is describe would be something like one of us going to confession with a priest, and also doing your civic duties like voting and paying your taxes. All at the same time (The only thing missing is a trip to the dentist...).



So, Jesus said, if you're in the middle of this very important spiritual and civic duty, stop and think about your neighbour. It's not enough to feel badly, it's not enough to pay the fine, you have to deal with the unresolved tension between you.

In the story, let's say that Fred is at the Temple when he “remembers” that he'd never talked to Barney about what his ox had done. Just somehow slipped his mind. So, even though he doesn't have to, Jesus recommends that Fred should leave the Temple to go talk to Barney.



Barney is understandably ticked off about the ox in the apple tree, but doubly so because Fred tried to cover it up. So Barney immediately sets off to report the crime and see to it that Fred is punished to the full extent of the law. Which means, of course, that they're going back to the Temple, to the Sanhedrin.

Now, Jesus' advice to Fred is to do whatever it takes to get Barney to settle out of court.

*“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.”*

Because if this case goes before the Sanhedrin, the judge is going to rule against Fred, and call the temple guard to take him away, and Fred will be thrown into prison. And, Jesus says, “truly, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”



Wow, that escalated quickly!

Again, this probably doesn't make a lot of sense to our modern, middle-class ears. How is it possible that Fred would be thrown in prison for something as simple as his ox getting loose? Obviously he had the money to pay for the damages, that's what he was doing at the Temple in the first place, paying the required fine. So how does he end up in prison working off some great debt?

Well, I made up the details of Fred's story, so maybe it's an exaggeration. Or maybe Jesus is using hyperbole to make a point.

But I think the situation rings true. The fact that Fred ends up in prison over a misdemeanor is only shocking if we make the assumption that the court system is fair and just. What if Fred can't afford a lawyer and Barney is third-cousins with the best personal injury and liability lawyer in town? What if Barney exaggerates the damages in his desire for vengeance so the ruling includes thousands of dollars in psychological damages? What if the judge assigned to the case has just read a news report about the escalating trends of improperly restrained oxen and decides to make an example out of

Fred's case? What if the criminal code is outdated and apple theft is on the books as a felony with mandatory minimum sentences? What if it's Fred's "third strike?"

Not something most of us would worry about. But Jesus' audience wasn't us most of us. They were the ones at or near the bottom, the outsiders, the ones at the mercy of the courts. Things look very different from down there. Again, being denied access to the Temple wasn't just a religious inconvenience. It meant being denied access to justice. Justice looks different from the bottom.

So, Jesus' advice is to leave the altar and the courts and do your best to make your own justice, because the system isn't designed to serve you.



So that's the story, as best as I can make sense of it. Now this is complicated stuff. I think it's important to acknowledge the 2000 years of distance that separates us from the particular situation that Jesus is speaking into, plus the major social and economic gaps between us and Jesus' audience. There's a big chance that we'll miss the meaning of this at a light or medium-depth reading.

So, knowing that I might not know what I'm talking about, here's what I think Jesus is up to in this story.

At the very least, he's warning people that their institutions are broken and ineffective.

Where do you turn for Justice? If you're looking for spiritual justice, if you want forgiveness for your sins, if you want to have right relationships with your neighbour and your God, DON'T go to the Temple. The priests and keepers of the Law of Moses were supposed to maintain *shalom*, right relationship with God and with each other. That was the purpose of the rituals and sacrifices and payments. They were supposed to bring justice and peace and God's blessing. But that wasn't working, Jesus said. Leave it behind.



And if you want civic justice, if you want a fair and just society, DON'T look to the Sanhedrin and their system of law and punishment. Judges and lawyers and priests and prisons, they're liable to turn on you. They don't serve the weak, they've been twisted to prop up the elite.

So leave the temple, Settle out of court. The Sanhedrin can't save you.

That's pretty inflammatory stuff! As Richard Rohr keeps saying in his work on the Sermon on the Mount, "there's a reason they killed him."

Jesus is directly challenging the powers that be, calling them out for their corruption and their failure to do their duties. This is defying the Mennonite bishops and being kicked out of your community and family. This is challenging the ayatollahs and being executed for blasphemy and treason. This isn't a go-to-church-and-pay-your-taxes speech, this is revolution! This isn't abstract spirituality, this is a political battlefield challenge. It's no wonder they killed him.

Now, it's not entirely clear in this text what exactly Jesus is offering as an alternative.

Jesus is talking to a crowd full of Freds and Barneys, and it's obvious that he wants them to work things out between them.

Some say that Jesus is a reformer, that he's saying that the Jewish establishment has drifted far from the original purposes of the Torah Law, that he has come to call his people back to the True Spirit of the Law. The teachings of Moses weren't meant to make people reliant on a Sanhedrin for justice, but to guide them in right living. The Sanhedrin was twisting that, as in this example where someone was thrown in prison for a misdemeanor.

Where do we look for Justice?  
*How do we gain right relationship with God?*  
*How do we maintain right relationships as a society?*

NOT through the Temple.  
NOT through the Sanhedrin.

What's the alternative?  
Reform?  
Revolution?



So maybe Jesus was calling for Fred and Barney to go back to the heart of the Law of Moses, to keep the Law themselves and leave the Sanhedrin out of it as much as possible. As in the Matthew 5:17-20 text Grant preached on last Sunday, Jesus didn't want to abolish the law but to fulfill the truth of it.

Or, some say that Jesus is more radical than that. Throw out the institutions and their rules and start over. Power to the people, a new world order. "You have heard it said... but I say to you." That seems to be part of the call in this text as well: the ancient ways aren't enough, the ancient words need a fresh interpretation. If you want Justice you have to work it out for yourselves, face-to-face, in this time and place.

So maybe Jesus didn't care what the Law of Moses said was the correct payment for damage done by a loose ox. Maybe Jesus was encouraging Fred and Barney to figure out for themselves what was honest and fair. Not by following a set of rules, but by practicing compassion and grace. Which is simple enough between two neighbours, but might seem pretty dangerous and threatening if practiced on a national or international level!

I'm not sure which Jesus was in the end, reformer or revolutionary. It seems to me that he had both types among his followers, and neither side was entirely satisfied with what Jesus said and did.

Like I said, it's not entirely clear what Jesus was offering as an alternative to the broken institutions.

It seems to me that Jesus' main concern here is that people recognize that Justice is not somebody else's problem.

*"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'"*

I can honestly say that I've never had any trouble keeping this commandment. I've never come close to murder. I worked up some pretty significant teenage rages against my older brother back in the day, but nothing like murder. I've never been in a real fight. I've only fired a gun one time under close supervision at a shooting range. I've never driven recklessly. I've never intentionally killed anything larger than a rodent--though I did chase down and run over a groundhog once with a tractor, but the resilient beast just kept right on going.

If justice is about "you shall not murder," well, then, I'm all good. That's somebody else's problem. In fact, "Lock up the murderers," I say. Go ahead and punish *them* to the full extent of the law. Keep *them* out. Fix *them*, *they're* the problem.

*"But I say to you," Jesus said, "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."*

Uh-oh. I managed all three of those in a single three kilometer stretch on Circle Drive just yesterday!

From this perspective, justice hits a little closer to home. Justice isn't just about locking up murderers, stopping terrorists, and punishing criminals. In Jesus' scenario, I'm part of the problem! My attitudes and behaviors and relationships, they fall short as well. I'm on the wrong side of the Law of Moses, too.

And that makes a huge difference.

As Jesus points out in the story that follows, my shortcomings make me liable to judgment. If the courts operated this way, Barney can't ask the court to throw the book at Fred's crime, because that would also risk inviting full punishment for Barney's faults as well. I can't call on God to damn those who trespass against me without damning myself for my trespasses.

Justice for *them* has to include Justice for me. And if we are all under the law and subject to judgment, then it's pretty important that the law is just and judgments are fair!

And so Jesus called Fred and Barney to leave the Sanhedrin and pursue true mutual justice between themselves.

Two thousand years later, what do we do with that?

We don't have a Sanhedrin, but is this a call to examine our own institutions for brokenness and corruption? Do we have people like Fred being punished beyond the levels of their crimes? Do our courts favor some people over others and solidify the influence of the powerful at the expense of the weak?

Do we hear those among us who call out bias and brutality in our law-and-order enforcement, and do we dare to stand (and kneel) with them? For those of us whose violations are more along the lines of anger and name-calling, are we truly invested in Justice for all, and do we consider our complicity in the problems of the world?

Or maybe this is a call to personal responsibility? Do we look out for the interests of others, or do we try to get away with whatever we can as long as we stay mostly within the legal limits? Do we let our institutions tell us what Justice is, or do we do our best to err on the side of generosity and mercy and hospitality? Our Anabaptist ancestors took this as a call to intentionally avoid secular courts to settle their disputes (with mixed motives and results, no doubt). Their intent, at its purest, was that the followers of Jesus held themselves to a higher standard of Justice, ideally to follow the way of love over and beyond the rule of law.

Or perhaps this is an invitation to consider the connections among us, that a person who murders their neighbour is not all that different from a person who wishes their neighbour were dead? Perhaps the blame is not all on Fred; maybe Barney could share the

responsibility of maintaining their shared fence, or maybe even be more generous with his prized apples. Maybe evil is not an individual issue but a collective one. Maybe reconciliation demands not only punishment or apology, but also reparations and commitments to living in mutual accountability moving forward.

Or maybe the call is all of that and more. Jesus never said this was going to be easy. I'll close with a reminder from the Talmud, texts written by other Jewish rabbis of Jesus' time:

*Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.*

(or, I would add, the complexities and the weight of the call to justice)

*You are not obligated to complete the work,*

*But neither are you free to abandon it.*

May the Wisdom and Compassion of God meet us on the journey.

