

RELUCTANT CHRISTIANS
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Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Many of us are distressed and distraught over what is happening in our country. And that includes the youth of our church who are troubled by what they see in their schools. We all face an existential choice. I'll get back to that but first the lesson from the Old Testament, an excerpt from Moses' farewell address to his people, to his nation.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live in the land. (Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

Choose life!

Everyday we face choices including what to do with our anger. And that brings us to the gospel lesson from the Sermon on the Mount.

"You have heard that it was said, '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, insult or call them morons or losers, you will be liable to the hell of fire. (Matthew 5:21-37)

In other words, anger is like fire. It can create and it can destroy. It all depends on the how we choose to respond. If you're not angry these days, you're not paying attention.

Several parents told me recently that their children are having a hard time in school, a hard time with certain Christian classmates. Lately, these classmates have become more bold and brash in spewing forth hateful and bigoted remarks about gays, refugees and Muslims.

Which makes you wonder, what has suddenly emboldened these kids? And, it makes you wonder what kind of church those kids attend?

I don't know. I can only guess. But I do know this: that sort of thing makes the children of our church cringe and ashamed to be associated with Christianity. I certainly understand.

I, too, cringe when I hear such things coming from the mouth of so-called Christian preachers on television. They may be Christian but they're certainly not Christ-like. There's a big difference.

Too many Christians are giving Christ a bad name. And that's what makes our kids and many of us reluctant Christians.

In fact, if the president wants to give priority to Christian refugees, I'd like to be on that vetting team. In that regard, I'm all for extreme vetting. For if those Christian refugees are anything like some of the Christians already in this country, our American ideals, not to mention our Christian values of hospitality and inclusion are in danger.

There's more than one way to destroy a country. Bombs are hardly the worst of our worries. There are far more serious and insidious threats to our nation.

Michael Gerson is a columnist for *The Washington Post*. He's a Republican and was chief speechwriter for former President Bush. Gerson is, or was, a proud evangelical Christian.

He and I both know that tribe quite well. He and I both graduated from Wheaton, a premier evangelical college in Illinois. I moved out of that camp long ago. Gerson remained.

He is now in a perpetual state of shock and dismay, not to mention great embarrassment, that so many in that particular camp tolerated anti-Christian rhetoric during the campaign and now condone anti-christian policies. Gerson is deeply troubled that so many of his tribe betrayed their long-professed Christian values and convictions. He is now a reluctant Christian.

Apparently not all Christians or all churches are the same. I know we here are not perfect and I'm not even sure what that means. But I do know this: we take Jesus seriously. And that means we take the Sermon on the Mount seriously.

We want to be part of the Jesus movement, a historic movement launched and inspired by these words: *Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers. Love your neighbors near and far. And while you're at it, love your enemies, too.*

We take Jesus seriously. But that also means taking seriously the less familiar and more challenging parts of the Sermon on the Mount, like this admonition from today's gospel lesson. *You've heard it said: Don't murder. But that's not good enough. It's not enough to merely keep the law. You must go deeper.*

In other words, being respectable and being a patriot are good, but not good enough. Respectability and patriotism are shallow and too small a thing. We must go deeper and further. Self-righteousness and holier-than-thou attitudes can prevent us from cultivating real compassion.

So if you are angry with someone, says Jesus, by all means, don't kill them but neither dismiss, demean or dehumanize them. Such seething, unresolved anger will burn like hell in your soul. You must work to be reconciled.

These days there are a lot of angry people in our nation.

Anger is a normal, healthy and wholesome reaction to injury or injustice—real or imagined— against ourselves or against someone we love. If someone injures or mistreats you or someone you love and you're not angry, something's wrong. If you're paying attention these days and you love your neighbors near and far, you gotta be angry.

Anger is a reaction. We can't control our reactions; but we can control our responses. Anger is a healthy reaction to injury and injustice. But vengeance or mere venting is not a constructive response. Empathy, humility and hard work toward reconciliation is.

One way leads to death and destruction; the other to life and transformation. Choose life.

Some of our youth are angry. I'm glad they are. And I'm glad they are reluctant Christians. And I'm also glad when their parents tell me how grateful they are to have a church like this in which to raise their children.

As in any household with children, children are always listening, watching and learning from adults. In this household of faith, these parents tell me, their children are reassured that they are not alone. Here they can see there's more than one way of being Christian.

So here's a shout out to our children and young people who are standing up for the way of Christ despite their revulsion over those who flaunt that holy name. I don't expect them or any of us to pick a fight over who is and who isn't a better Christian. That gets you nowhere. Let them have the title Christian while you work on acting like one.

So, kids, keep shining your light in the darkness. Keep standing up and speaking out for justice and love. We got your back.

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Hymn 314

"Longing for Light, We Wait in Darkness"