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When I read today's gospel,
I groaned a little bit.
I'm not a hellfire
and damnation preacher –
what's more we're not
a particularly hellfire
and damnation denomination
or church.

Unfortunately, today
Jesus seems to be
harshly describing
how weak we all are –
declaring that our private thoughts
are as evil as the sin
of murder and adultery.
Throw in the sentences
about divorce
and you can see why
I label this passage
a groaner.

But instead of taking
these words at face value,
and all of us leaving here
feeling completely unworthy
and unable to live up to
Jesus' high standards –
let's take a moment
and just breathe.

Jesus, we know,
is not a hellfire
and damnation preacher either.
Oh, he's adamant
and strong and demanding –
but he's not really
in the damnation business.
He's made a career
out of salvation.
And so let's unpack
the context and history
of what Jesus is talking about.

First, Jesus talks about murder.
The Jewish people live by
the 10 commandments,
and so they know
not to commit murder.
But Jesus is telling them
that it is not enough
to refrain from murder,
even the angry thoughts
and rifts between us
are murderous and sinful
in God's eyes.

William Barclay declares that
“it was Jesus' teaching
that a man is not judged
only by his deeds,
but is judged even more
by the desires which
never emerge in deeds.

By the world's standards

a man is a good man
if he never does a forbidden thing.
By Jesus' standards,
a man is not a good man
until he never even desires
to do a forbidden thing.

Jesus is intensely concerned
with a person's thoughts.”
He is constantly teaching
that it is not what goes in
that makes a person unclean
but what comes out,
the thoughts, words,
and yes sometimes actions.

Moreover, Jesus says
that we must be willing
to remove whatever it is
that causes us to sin –
dramatically illustrating
this by suggesting
removing an eye
to alleviate adultery,
losing an arm
to alleviate the sin
of hate.

When Jesus talks about
having anger in the heart,
he is reframing the old covenant's law.
The law said that
you shall not kill.
Jesus is saying that anger
is as sinful as murder.

Now Jesus uses the Greek verb
(OR-GA-ZETH-EYE) orgizesthai
to describe anger
against a brother.
This is the root word FOR ogre,
which we use to describe
an angry and monstrous creature.

This kind of anger is
long lived,
it has become inveterate.

This is the kind of anger
that a person keeps alive
in their heart by brooding
and feeding
the hate and jealousy.

Jesus then goes on
to condemn another
kind of anger.

He describes examples
of when anger leads
to insulting words.
This kind of language
was forbidden for Jews,
and rabbis would talk
about the oppression
of words
or the sin of insult.

“And so, anger
in a man’s heart,

and anger in a man's speech
are equally forbidden." (Barclay)

Anger in speech
is a real problem
for us today.

This kind of talk
is an indication
of contempt
for another.

Just turn on the TV,
the radio,
read the editorials,
or bumper stickers,
listen to lunchroom gossip
or water cooler conversation
or simply open up your email
and you will
hear and see angry
and contemptuous speech.

Barclay says that
"there is no sin
quite so unchristian
as the sin of contempt.
We should never
look with contempt
on any one
for whom Christ died."

Then Jesus says
that anyone who casts
aspersions on the moral character

of another was
subject to the judgment
fires of Gehenna.

Did you hear the word I used?
I said the fires of Gehenna.
Now, this word is often
translated as hell,
which is where we get
the term hellfire.

But when we talk about hell,
we typically mean
a vague and torturous place
where sinners go
to eternal torment.

For Jesus and the Jews,
Gehenna was a literal
real place –
an infamous place
that all regarded
with disdain and loathing.

Gehena is in
the Valley of Hinnom,
a valley to the southwest
of Jerusalem.

It is in this valley
that the Hebrew King Ahaz
, not only worshipped idols,
but actually sacrificed children
to the fire god Molech.

The next king, Josiah
came in and cleaned things up,
but the valley was forever
considered a cursed
and evil place.

It became a place
where people brought
their refuse,
fires burned all day long,
every day
consuming the rubbish
and waste.

A viscous type of worm
lived there that
was hard to kill.

Soon the smoky,
smoldering waste
became a place symbolic
of where all evil things
were taken
to be destroyed.

So Jesus is saying
that murder, anger
contempt and false witness
are sinful in their actions
and their impulses.

What's more,
people may see and judge
the outward appearance –
but God sees

the inward thought and desire.
You can see
what Jesus is leading up to.
There is not a person alive
who is blameless
in the eyes of God.

As usual,
this is taking the status quo
and turning it
upside down.

The faithful had depended
on the safety
of the commandments –
as long as they did not
commit these forbidden sins
, they felt smug
in their righteousness.
They had no need
of God if they could
only follow the rules.

Jesus deflates their pride
by saying that thoughts
and desires are seen
and judged by God –
and no one is safe
or able to be
righteous on their own.

The good news is
that we can reconcile –
with one another
and with God.

Now, Jesus is talking
about true confession
and penitence which means
not just confessing
to a sin,
but rectifying it.

Barclay says that “
the Jews were quite clear
that not even the sacrifices
on the day of atonement
could avail for a man
unless he was first
reconciled to his neighbor.

The breach between
a man and God
could not be healed
until the breach between
men was healed.”

And so, I would be remiss
if I told you not to
worry about this.

In fact we should worry.
Not because we are sinners,
for God knows that we
are unable to live perfect lives.
That is why he sent us his son.

No, we should worry
because we are not let
off the hook.

We are told to banish anger,
to decry contempt
and envious thoughts.
We are to atone for those mistakes
we make and rectify
the damage we cause
when it is possible.

We are to admit our sins
to God and be right
with one another before
we can be right with God.
We are to mend
our differences
before we share
our communion meal.

That's hard.
Today, when we confess
our sins together,
really think about these words.
The Celtic prayer book
uses the following beautiful confession:

*Merciful God, we have sinned in what we have
thought and said,
In the wrong we have done and in the good we have
not done.
We have sinned in ignorance; we have sinned in
weakness;
We have sinned through our own deliberate fault.
We are truly sorry.
We repent and turn to you.
Forgive us, for our Savior Christ's sake,*

*And renew our lives to the glory of your name.
Amen.*

Private confession is available
for any who want
this sacrament as well.
But know this –
we are assured God’s mercy
and forgiveness for these sins
when we humbly confess
and earnestly desire
the strength to change

*The words of the Celtic
Absolution reflects this assurance:*

Through the cross of Christ,
God have mercy on you,
pardon you, and set you free.
Know that you are forgiven
and be at peace.
God strengthen you
in all goodness and keep you
in life eternal. *Amen.*