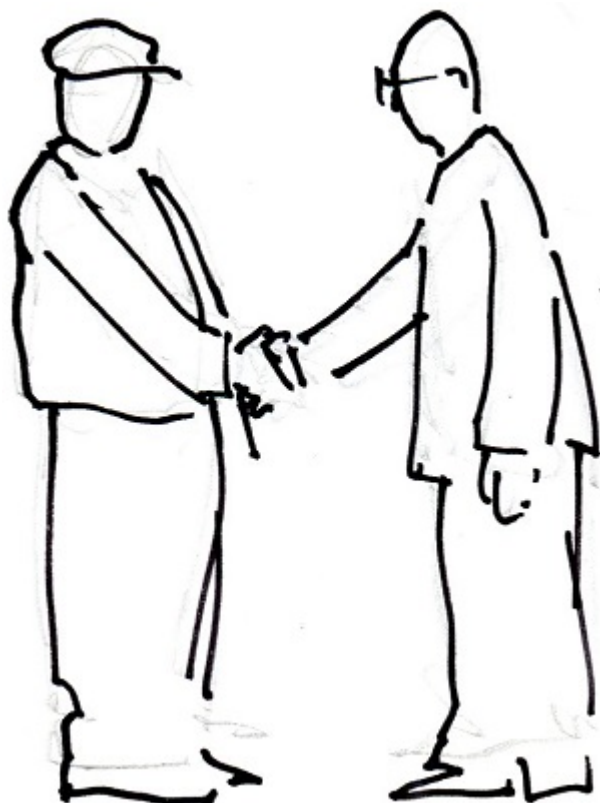


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by Pat Marrin

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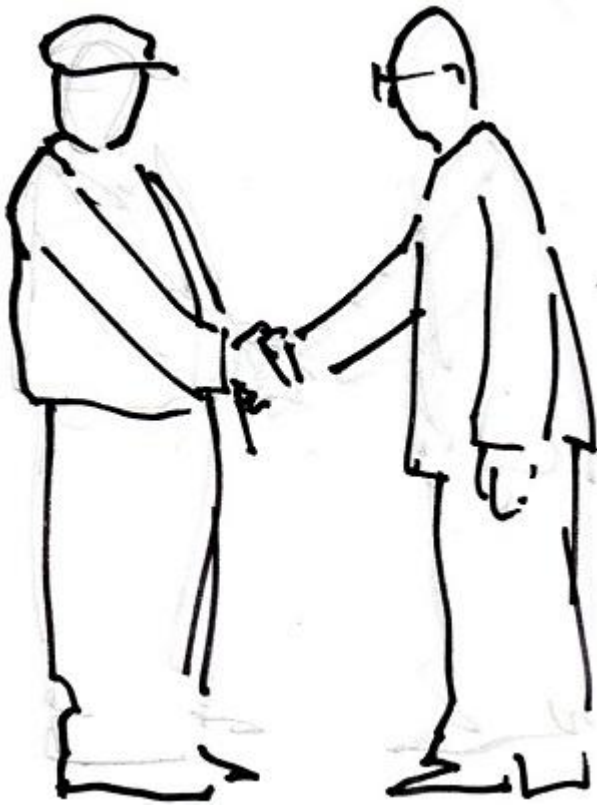
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“Settle with your opponent quickly” (Matthew 5:25).

Ezek 18:21-28; Matt 5:20-26

Jesus’ central message was that the “kingdom of God” was at hand. Just what was this kingdom? It was not an earthly sovereignty, though its influence was pervasive and decisive. It was powerful, yet manifested in paradox, a sign to the weak and the poor that God was present in them and for them. Wherever it was announced, evil retreated and wholeness and liberation were restored. Jesus was somehow its exemplar. God was speaking and acting through him. Those who heard Jesus’ word felt a revolution in their hearts that changed the way they saw everything and moved them to want to change the world.

Prayer was the lifeline into this mysterious realm that Jesus proclaimed. It was pure gift and therefore could not be owned or controlled, but it was accessible to everyone, especially sinners, outcast, wounded and oppressed people. At the same time, it eluded the proud and the self-righteous, the wise and clever. Only those who submitted to God’s authority and Spirit could experience the peace and joy of living in right relationship with all Creation as ordered by the Great Commandment of love.

In today's Gospel, Jesus alerts his disciples that unchecked and unresolved anger can block them from the kingdom. Do not imitate the scribes and Pharisees whose veneer of virtue and graciousness covered hearts smoldering with pride and contempt for others. They kept the letter of the law but not its spirit. They did not murder anyone, but they let anger harden their hearts and shrivel their spirits. They ruled over the people but did not love them.

Jesus says that this lack of empathy and the inability to forgive block prayer. He warns his disciples not to let the sun go down on unresolved conflict lest a simple quarrel deepen into bitterness, then harden into hatred, brooding and self-justification. He compares it to taking a complaint to court before a judge, who orders you to jail and to pay a fine that must be paid to the last penny before you are released. Better to settle quickly on the way. Resolve things before you go to worship, because love of God and love of neighbor are one and the same.

The imagery describes exactly what happens when anger is allowed to take root. How many family quarrels have led to estrangement that lasts a lifetime and beyond, hurt feelings that might have been resolved early or healed with a phone call or simple apology, siblings imprisoned in their pride, going to the grave unable to forgive when they might have seized the grace of the moment and set themselves and everyone else free.

To be in the kingdom is to be in the company of God, who is all merciful and forgiving. To share God's life, we must become like God. This is why we must forgive before we can begin to pray. Asking for the grace of forgiveness is then our first prayer.

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