

Sermon Outline

Leave Your Gift and First Be Reconciled.

- I. It is dangerous to go to the altar when harboring anger and resentment.
- II. Therefore, many churches have reintroduced the Peace, but it can be a bloody, messy business.
- III. Thankfully, Jesus perfectly finished the bloody business of reconciling.

Sermon

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

My dear beloved flock, the text for our meditation today is the Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew, the fifth chapter verses twenty-one through thirty-seven. Focusing on verse twenty-four: “Leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (Mt 5:24)

Boys and girls, I pray that you are doing well today. Do you know what this is? That’s right, this is the altar. It is a place where we remember and receive Jesus’ sacrifice upon the cross for our sins in His body and blood. Today, we hear more of Jesus’ sermon on the mount. Jesus is speaking to people who regularly traveled south to Jerusalem to present their offerings on the Temple *Mount*. This was the great altar located just outside the doors of the temple. Thousands of worshipers brought sacrificial animals to be offered on this high altar.

Matthew *wrote* these words to be read to new Christians who anticipated coming to the Lord’s altar for the Eucharist. So which altar is it? It is both at once. The Old Testament altar and liturgy pointed forward to and is fulfilled in Christ’s self-sacrifice on the cross and his presence in the Sacrament of the Altar.

Today, Jesus directs our attention to the altar here in the front of this sanctuary. He is talking about the Divine Liturgy of Word and Sacrament, in which the beautiful ritual flow is suddenly interrupted: “Leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” How can we come before the altar and offer our gifts today? Ponder this question as you hear the rest of the sermon. You may go back to your seats and those who love you.

Leave Your Gift and First Be Reconciled.

I.

Two elements shape the meaning of Jesus’ words for us today: *liturgy* and *anger*.

Some things never change. Matthew 5 deals with “worship wars,” but not the war between traditional and contemporary worship styles. Jesus is talking about the wars that go on among brothers who come together to worship and expect to receive the reconciling body and blood of the Christ in the Lord’s Supper while they harbor anger and resentment toward one another.

It is dangerous to go to the liturgy when you are angry. More specifically, it is dangerous to go to the altar when you are angry. Forgiving others or asking others to forgive you is not optional for those who desire to come to the Lord’s Supper.

Sin and anger against others are an unavoidable part of life in this fallen world, especially among those who are closest to us. Many family dinners have been disrupted by anger and cruel words. Hurt feelings, hatred, and bitterness can last for hours or even days. But then comes Sunday, and the family is again invited over to the Lord’s house for the family dinner. Do we continue the feud, or do we reconcile?

It is a dangerous thing to approach the altar with someone with whom you refuse to be reconciled. To despise someone at the altar into whom the Lord has put his body and blood is to despise the Lord’s body and blood. One of the oldest liturgical manuals was written about the same time as Matthew’s Gospel. In chapter 14, the *Didache* warns congregations, “On the Lord’s Day you assemble and break bread. . . . But let no one who has a quarrel with his companion join with you until they have been reconciled” (14:1–2; author’s translation). For this reason, ancient liturgies included the kiss of peace after the Service of the Word, prior to the Service of Holy Communion. Recon-cil-i-a-tion and peace with others must precede reception of the body and blood.

II.

Liturgical revisions of the twentieth century reintroduced this ancient custom into many churches in the form of a handshake accompanied by the words, “Peace be with you.” Instead of being understood as serious business, the Peace sometimes degenerates into a confusing cacophony of jolly “good mornings,” hugs, and friendly chitchat. As annoying as this may be to the liturgical purists, there is something far worse that can take place. This is when the Peace is refused or avoided. You see the offending party in a pew far from you and are relieved that you will not have to exchange the seemingly innocent little phrase, “Peace be with you.” But the full significance of these four little words becomes apparent as they rub up against the bitterness, hurt, and anger. Truth is, after what they’ve done to you, you can muster up not one ounce of love, compassion, and mercy for the two-faced fool. Thankfully, the church is full. You can avoid them by communing at a separate table on your side of

the altar and they can commune on their side.

Anyone who has not experienced such feelings has never been stabbed in the back by a smiling, pious brother. When it comes to pastoral practice, it's a lot easier to do a doctrinal check on the individual's confession of the *real presence* than to bring about *real* reconciliation. Furthermore, an examination of one's own heart shows that reconciliation is a bloody, hurtful, messy business.

III.

But Jesus tells us, "Leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." That is what Jesus himself did. He left the temple. Without complaint, he was taken outside Jerusalem to Calvary in order there to reconcile the world to himself by the shedding of his blood. Reconciliation is a bloody, painful business. Jesus then explains, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28).

We should imitate Jesus, whose perfect life and merciful death reconciled the world with himself. But all our imitating will never be enough and never be finished. So, we go on imitating and reconciling. But more important, we give thanks that Jesus left the altar in the temple to reconcile with his brother. We are that brother, and our reconciliation cost him his life. It was a bloody business, but it was perfect, complete, and it is finished. With him, we can now return and offer our gifts in forgiveness and reconciliation.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.