

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

On Valentine's weekend our minds turn to thoughts of love, hugs and kisses, so it's disorienting to hear a gospel today about anger, infidelity, and cursing. Of course, Jesus is onto something. True love will keep those unwanted behaviors in check.

When anger builds up inside us, we sometimes ridiculously express it against the people we love the most—members of our family, for example, who may not even be directly responsible for our stress. In a weird way, it implies we trust these people to love us enough to put up with our bad behavior. Yet they above all deserve the best of our behavior. Jesus talked about anger as a subcategory of the command not to kill. If his audience was thinking, "I'm OK; I haven't committed murder," he warned, "whoever is angry with his brother [or sister] will be liable to judgment." Anger can lead to violence. Jesus promoted reconciliation, not the purchase of weapons.

Infidelity is most devastating when it takes the form of adultery. After making a commitment to one person, it's wrong to break it in a relationship with another. Those who commit adultery usually try to hide it, unlike anger, which people often make public. Infidelity can take different forms. It arises in the pursuit of personal interests at the exclusion of the spouse, in activities such as hours of scrolling through inappropriate screens. Jesus talked about lust as a subcategory of the command not to commit adultery. If his audience was thinking, "I'm OK; I haven't cheated on my spouse," he warned, "anyone who looks at [another] with lust has already committed adultery." Lust can lead to unfaithfulness. Jesus promoted separation from temptations, not from our commitments.

Cursing often relates to anger and lying. Some people justify their salty vocabulary based on the work they do, the company they keep, the songs they hear, or the movies they see. Yet cursing often demonstrates a narrowly developed vocabulary to express opinions more thoughtfully or a disregard for the principles that others hold. Some people try to hide their habit of swearing but slip, asking pardon for what they call "French". Jesus talked about swearing as a subcategory of taking false oaths. If his audience was thinking, "I'm OK; I haven't committed perjury," he warned, "do not swear at all.... Let your 'Yes mean 'Yes,' and your 'No' mean 'No.'" Little lies may lead to bigger ones. Jesus promoted speaking truth with charity.

Especially on Valentine's weekend, Jesus' three themes are unsettling: Anger, infidelity, and cursing. At every level of American society people use hate speech as entertainment and choose bullying in place of dialogue. You find infidelity practiced, tolerated and encouraged. You hear words that add more spice than substance.

Perhaps Valentine's is the best time to reflect on these themes. A weekend that the best of American culture still devotes to expressions of love invites us to do something more than smell roses and eat chocolate. We can give signs of respect to the people we love and even to those we don't.