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Matthew, Why so Mad?
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The anger heightens; the narrative tumbles on the tracks; the violent imagination may yield actual violence. The writer of Matthew is losing his temper. Matthew, what are you so mad at? In Matthew's gospel, his enemies are the religious elite that have kicked his community out of the synagogue. Why were they kicked out? It had something to do with how Matthew's community interpreted Christ's indictment of these elites—that not only do they neglect justice and mercy, but they are instigators of violence and evil. We are at a spot in the gospel and in our liturgical year—these last three Sundays before Advent—when we hear what Matthew wants to happen to his enemies. He uses three parables against his enemies—the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids (last week), the parable of the talents (which we hear today), and the parable of the sorting of sheeps and goats (next week). How might we understand what is at stake for him? How might we yearn for the same kind of justice, but not be consumed with anger that bends toward hate, retribution, and violence?

Imagine, if you will, you are seeing innocent people being robbed of their home, violated by evil—can you think of where this might be happening? Imagine if the very people you thought ought to know better and do better are the ones who are actually the instigators of the terror? Imagine if these were a group you thought you belonged in, but when you spoke out against its actions, they kicked you out and shut you up. This is how Matthew sees the situation, but Matthew will not shut up. He cries out, "There are consequences to your evil! You will be punished. God will judge you!" There's too much at stake. So, he raves, he rants, he calls down God's wrath on his enemies.

Whenever we get to this point in the Gospel of Matthew, I always cringe. It's the same cringe I make when I read the psalm that begs God to bash in the heads of the babies of their enemies. Isn't that going too far, even in the imagination? But, shouldn't the fact that I can go there (and I can) mean that I am no better than my enemy—that anger can turn to hate, turn to violence in the blink of an eye—and I find myself lost in a dark country? How do we speak about the consequences of evil without being consumed by our anger at evil?

It has been said and rightly so that Matthew's parables do not address individuals but groups—not just the religious elite, not just the chosen “nation” as represented in Jerusalem, but the gentile nations—any collective power. It is to these powers, not individuals, that Matthew is addressing. His indictment is against institutions and nations that do not serve justice and mercy and he imagines they will fall to a terrible fate. In the parable of the bridesmaids, those who were not diligent to attend to Christ, that is, the nation that does not pay attention will be cast into weeping and gnashing of teeth by its own treachery. Likewise, the nation that buries its treasure and does not use it for the sake of the community—they will by their own treachery be cast into darkness. And finally, the nation that does not attend to the least of these—the poor, the imprisoned, the immigrant—they will not thrive; they will by their own treachery reap woe.

All that is important to hold. There are consequences to neglecting justice and mercy. That I can track with Matthew. I can even hold that the parables use tropes of the time of kings and slaves to make a point and Jesus used them, even if the trope in my time isn't so acceptable.

Matthew's parables are the most violent in the New Testament. He seemed to delight in imagining his enemies weeping and gnashing their teeth—he loved to use this phrase. But, today, as I look upon the world, where wrath has been poured out by our violence and our retribution, I want to peer into how we wed wrath with justice. Today, as I look at how we respond to violence with violence, how our anger takes us so quickly to hate, to killing a fellow human being, I say, “Let us not be consumed by the fire of

indignation that we light. Let's do better." We don't need to imitate Matthew's rage imagination, even as we understand his heartbreak. When we are angry, when we lose our temper, let us fall on the mercy of God to save us from being consumed by our own fire.

This new world that Matthew was praying for requires not just the practice of justice and mercy, but the practice of self-control, non-violence, and peace. There is no way we can have a new world outwardly without inward transformation. We must cry out for justice and mercy, but that same cry must echo inside our own heart—action without contemplation leads to a multiplication of violence and a distaste for mercy; and contemplation without action is like burying money in the ground—it is ineffectual. We must do both and it demands we be nimble. And, we will leave judgment to God, for God is the only one who has enough mercy to judge us.