

“Ad Hominem”
Matthew 5:21-37
February 12, 2017
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

You know, our President has been married three times? I'm really not going to believe anything he says about immigration. And do you realize that Senator Al Franken, the Democrat from Minnesota used to be an actor and writer on Saturday Night Live? I'm sure that all the stuff he says is just made up as well. And I never watch that news show, “Morning Joe” on MSNBC, do you realize that Joe Scarborough is a huge Alabama fan? Who can believe a guy like that? And his partner Mika Brsesinski's father was the national security advisor to Jimmy Carter? You know she's just saying whatever the Democrats want.

You can hear arguments like that all the time these days. Especially these days when the political and public world seems to be characterized by a lot of negativity of one person towards another, of one group towards another, of one party towards another. The problem with all of those statements that I just said is that they are arguments *ad hominem*.

When I was a senior in college, I was very close to having all the credits I needed to graduate with a double major in religion and philosophy. The religion part was easy, I loved those classes. But philosophy was tougher. I needed one more class on the philosophy side and it had to be a class in Logic. Logic—not my best subject. I like arguing the emotional side of things, how I felt, not what made logical sense. But I had to take it, and there I learned about logical fallacies. These are statements or arguments that people often make that logically do no make sense but people do them all the time anyway. One of the most common is the argument *ad hominem*. *Ad hominem* mean against the man or against the person. An *argumentum ad hominem* is any kind of argument that criticizes an idea by pointing something out about the people who hold the idea rather than directly addressing the merits of the idea. That's a logical fallacy. It doesn't matter whether Joe Scarborough roots for Alabama or Al Franken was really funny in *Trading Places* or how many times Donald Trump has been married

when they express an idea for the country. If I want to argue it, I should argue the idea not the person.

But we do that so often. We don't like the person, therefore we don't like the idea.

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins a series of what are often called the Antitheses.

That is a scholarly way of saying that these are a set of sayings by Jesus that begin, "You have heard that it was said of old . . . but I say to you." These are often seen as Jesus changing the Old Testament

law but if you think about it they are actually a deepening of the law rather than a changing of the law.

The people were beginning to realize that the law of God was not just following some rules as it seems to be in the passage from Deuteronomy that Kalli read for us. Rather as Jesus talks about it, it seems to

be a matter of the heart. When Jesus tells the disciples, you have heard that it was said of old, you shall not kill, but I say to you don't even be angry with your brother or sister, he is showing us that it is not

just a matter of not doing the deed, he is showing us that it is a matter of where our heart is. He tells

the disciples that if they are coming to worship at the temple or the synagogue and realize that someone has something against them, to go make peace before coming to worship God. That idea is not just

Christian. The most holy day in Judaism is Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement. This is the day when each Jew is supposed to fast and make sure their relationship with God is what it should be, and they

atone for any sins they have committed during the year. But the day before Yom Kippur is called Erev Yom Kippur which just means "before yom kippur." That is the day on which they are supposed to

make sure that their relationships with other people are what they should be. Before you make it right with God, make it right with one another.

Actually I think that's what all these antitheses are all about. They warn us against broken

relationships. It's not enough just not to murder or not to commit adultery or break your marriage or lie under oath. It's more a matter of the heart. It's caring about the relationship we have with another, with

a person that we might be attracted to, but we don't want to just use them for our own ends. It is being concerned about the relationship of marriage and not just what we get out of it. It's holding up the

value of the truth in the community and not just trying to think how we can get away with something to

our own advantage.

I started this discussion talking about arguments *ad hominem*, an argument against the person. I think in a way that's what Jesus is speaking against as well. All these ideas that he is speaking about are when we treat each other badly, when we live our lives *ad hominem*, against each other. Instead of speaking *ad hominem*, what if spoke *pro hominem*, for the person. I think Jesus is holding up the holiness of relationships and warning us against the selfishness of the individual. Today we had the chance to stand up and say we are going to do that. When we baptized Mariela we stood up and said that we are going to be concerned about her, that we will pray for her, that we will help her, that we will support and love her. We are going to structure our community of faith *pro hominem*, for the person, for the relationship, not against. Sure we will have arguments, disagreements, even fights. But aren't we promising that we will disagree directly with an idea, not against a person, that we will love each other even if we disagree? Because in baptism we are made part of the same family. We proclaimed today that in her baptism, God has joined Mariela with us in God's ministry of love and peace and justice. We proclaim that we are all in this together, all in the same boat. And when we argue *ad hominem*, we are poking holes in our own boat.