

“Finding a Path to Reconciliation” 9-11-16 CHC

Old Testament, Psalm 90:1-7; 12-17

New Testament, Matthew 5:21-26

We all experience the emotion of anger. It is human to do so. My personal journey dealing with anger is mixed with both constructive and destructive responses. I have not always responded in the right way to my own or another person's anger. I recall a time when I stuffed my anger toward one person and when confronted by that person denied that I was even angry. Was I afraid of the anger in me or in the other? He had the courage to call me on it which then freed me to deal with it and stay in relationship with him.

Jesus is obviously concerned about the effect of anger upon our souls. This is that infamous day we call 9-11. As we watched the boiling rage of anger and hate acted out by terrorists in the well-orchestrated destruction of the Twin Towers we too responded in kind. An angry nation wanted revenge and so a bi-partisan coalition of Democrats and Republicans in Congress found a target for our anger. We invaded Iraq. One act of hate spawned multiple others. Has it gone well? Has it solved anything?

This election year seems to be releasing a lot of pent up anger. We have seen major expressions of anger against both political parties during the primary and party caucus season. We especially witness it in the supporters of those candidates. “What, we might ask, are the long-term implications of a society dominated by the politics of anger?” one person asked. We also see much anger being directed toward Muslims and other immigrants. Anger loves to scapegoat.

Let's look at the physiology of anger. Ruminating on the dark side of anger leads to anxiety and depression. Depression is often tied to unresolved anger. Heightened anger may impair our thinking, motivation, concentration, memory and problem solving abilities. We can drive people away from us with unresolved anger.

Focusing on thoughts of revenge or angry memories raises the levels of cortisol and adrenalin as part of our fight or flight system. If we do neither, the cortisol and adrenalin remain in the body affecting the immune system, sleep patterns, and our overall emotional well-being. Heart disease and depression are often linked to these hormones (Garratt and Blackburn, 'Anger Management Course Workbook, Homiletics, Sept.-Oct, p.23).

So Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment’. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment...” Jesus is concerned with our thoughts and motives, the inner person and what effects mind, body, and soul. God sees what lies deep within our hearts. David can say, “O Lord, you have searched me, and known me...and are acquainted with all my ways...” (Psalm 139:1-6).

Jesus lists gradations of anger. The first person is angry with a brother or sister. There are two words for anger in the Greek language, thumos and orge. The first depicts the anger that rages for a moment and then dies down just as fast. The second is anger that becomes long-lived. This is the anger that nurses

wrath toward another, brooding over it, refusing to let it die. This is the anger that I believe lingers in our culture. Such anger is liable to the judgment court, Jesus says.

Jesus is opposing all selfish anger. James can write, “You must understand this, let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness” (James 1:20). Paul admonishes the Colossians to put off “all anger, wrath, malice, insulting speaking” (Col. 3:5).

Jesus uses a word we translate *raca*, meaning someone who holds another in arrogant contempt. As commentator Barclay observes, Jesus seems to be saying that though brooding anger is bad, the sin of contempt is worse (Barclay, ‘The Gospel of Matthew’, p.137).

A worse insult is to call another a ‘Fool’. It is to call someone a good-for –nothing. This means to cast a shadow on someone’s character, to destroy the individual’s name and declare that person immoral, loose living, or any other demeaning adjective. We have been witness to such verbal displacements throughout this season’s presidential campaign.

Jesus says that to destroy another person’s name and reputation is liable to the severest judgment, the hell of fire, Gehenna. This is the Valley of Hinnom where the evil king Ahaz introduced Israel into child sacrifice to the heathen God of Molech. There one would find the bones of the children sacrificed. It was declared an accursed place by the reformist king Josiah who stamped out Molech worship.

What is important for us in this teaching of Jesus is his concern for our character. What are the things going on inside of me that I am nursing and tempted to act upon that would lead me to harm another person in any way or ultimately take someone’s life? Jesus is most concerned about our thoughts and motives. He pushes for the humane in relationships, invites appropriate boundaries between us and others, and directs us toward resolving our feelings and attitudes toward others who may have pushed our buttons.

He leads us to repair the breach between those with whom we have issues. “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift”. Since it is our anger that disrupts relationships Jesus tells us to deal with it immediately. Take the initiative and re-establish the relationship as soon as possible. It does not matter if you are the wronged party or not.

There is a story involving Leonardo da Vinci. When working on his painting, ‘The Last Supper’, he became angry at an acquaintance. They had words and parted on bad terms. Leonardo returned to the church and continued painting. But he couldn’t do it. Reaching the point where he was painting the face of Jesus he could not go on.

He knew that he had work to do but it was not painting. Leonardo put down his brushes and palette and went searching for the man who had been the subject of his anger. He asked the man’s forgiveness who then offered an apology of his own.

It was then that Leonardo could resume his work. He could now return and finish the face of Jesus.

Whether true or not, there is a message consistent with what Jesus is saying. When our lives are being ruled with anger, we can't see the face of Jesus nor want to. To reconnect with Jesus we need to reconnect with our neighbor. Only then may we return to the altar (Homiletics, p.22-23). As John put it; "Whoever says, 'I am in the light, while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness'" (1John 2:9).

This is how we make God visible. We allow the Spirit of Christ to live in us, directing our minds and hearts to an appropriate response in all of our relationships. Paul frames it this way; "All this is from God, who reconciles us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us" (2Corinthians 5:18-20). Jesus lives the life he teaches us to live.

Jesus seeks to free us. Holding a grudge or stewing in one's anger is like taking poison and hoping the other person dies. We dig two graves, one for the other and one for ourselves. That is what we impose on ourselves when we turn a deaf ear and blind eye to Jesus.

Joanna, a young mixed race woman in South Africa was deeply impressed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings held after Mandela's election. She felt called by God to go into a gang infested prison bringing a simple message of forgiveness and reconciliation. Her work was so impressive that the BBC arrived from London to do a documentary on her. Before she began her visits, the prison recorded 279 acts of violence. The second year after her involvement there were two.

Philip Yancey interviewed her, pressing her on the specifics of what she did to transform that prison. He describes her response as she said, almost without thinking, "Well, of course, Philip, God was already present in the prison. I just had to make him visible" (Yancey, 'Grace Notes, p.316).

I like that. When we own our anger, allowing God to work through us to resolve and harness that anger and use it positively, we can become Christ to another, making his reconciling love visible.