

## **Anger: Our Friend or Foe?**

Have you noticed how angry people are these days? Have you been noticing how angry you have been getting lately? Regardless of whether we shout it out or hold it in, most of us, if we are honest, have had a problem with anger at some point in our lives. We all know the dangers associated with anger. If anger is not dealt with quickly and effectively it will likely tear away at the very fabric of every community to which you and I belong and every relationship, we hold dear—including our relationship with God.

Jesus noticed all of this too. In today's gospel lesson from Matthew we have a record of how Jesus attempted to teach his first disciples, and the crowds drawn to him, about handling anger. The original context tells us a lot about how we are to interpret his teachings. Jesus has just delivered his wonderful and inspiring Sermon on the Mount—the beatitudes—those beautiful attitudes that call forth the very best in each and every one of us and help us build healthy communities. These attributes are humility, healthy grieving in the face of losses, meekness, a thirst for righteousness and right living, mercy, purity of heart, and peacemaking. Jesus tells us that these are the states of being that bring forth blessedness and bring heaven more quickly to earth.

In sharp contrast, today's gospel lesson is focused on what takes away from living in a state of blessedness with God and others and interferes with building health community:

- Harboring murderous thoughts, words, and smoldering anger
- Intense conflict with a brother or sister within your own family or within the family of God
- maliciously calling someone a fool or moron (this is not referring to the healthy kind of foolishness that Father Lex has been preaching about lately),
- blowing someone off who believes you have deeply wronged or injured them (more about that later),
- having it out with someone challenging you in court
- lust, adultery, and divorce,

- and lastly, making false promises, lying to ourselves, others and God.

What do all of these difficult situations have in common? The experience of anger. I believe anger is the most misunderstood emotion on the planet. For so many of us, we have primarily seen unhealthy and destructive displays of anger—especially this past year—but many of us experienced it in our childhoods where those we loved, trusted, and depended upon harmed us with their words and actions.

Few psychologists would argue with the fact that anger is an essential emotion needed for our survival—it provides us with the energy needed to protect ourselves, set appropriate boundaries, and stand up against injustice. It is hard to know when anger is our friend or our foe. Even Jesus, himself, modeled the healthy expression of anger—the most well-known being his overturning the tables of the corrupt moneychangers at the temple.

This healthy and necessary type of anger is not what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel. There are two different Greek words used in the New Testament for anger. One describes a fiery, short-lived kind of anger that flames on and then quickly dies. The other describes a smoldering, festering type of anger, the kind that a person nurtures and keeps alive over a long period of time—perhaps even a lifetime. It is the later of these two kinds of anger that is being pointed to by Jesus in today's gospel lesson.

After all, Jesus is an expert in reading human hearts. He knew that it is in our nature to store up anger in the recesses of our hearts and let it fester over long periods of time, eventually creating destruction and chaos in our lives and our relationships. This is what the exasperated Apostle Paul was warning the nascent church in Corinth about. If we look carefully, we can see that Jesus is identifying a progression that we need to be concerned about: first comes anger and then the insults and then the justification in our own minds to treat someone as an inconsequential fool that doesn't have to be taken seriously. Some of you may be thinking, what is so horribly wrong with that? It is hardly a murderous action to call someone a fool. You are right; it is only a *pre-murderous* action but important nevertheless.

When you think about it, as soon as we start to de-humanize another human being we have started down a no U-turn road that can easily lead us to committing greater acts of aggression against others and ultimately harms our own souls. It is so much easier to tease, taunt or, God forbid, even torture someone else if you see them as less than human and inferior to yourself.

Jesus is right. This process eventually leads both the perpetrator and the victim into a type of hell. Hell is mentioned three different times in today's gospel lesson so I am inclined to take it seriously even though I don't think Jesus actually wants us to cut off any body parts. He simply wants us to cut us free from unhealthy attachments to anger, sin, and especially seeking retribution. God doesn't need to create a hell and send us there. We are perfectly capable of doing that ourselves and often all we need is a misguided tongue to create hell for us and for others.

How we treat others matters to God and it matters to us as the Body of Christ. In fact, Jesus primary mission is to help us to get right with Him and with each other. This is at the very heart of today's gospel lesson. That is why the act of receiving communion is so important to us as Christians. It is there, in the real presence of Christ, that we, no matter where we have been last week, in heaven or in hell, whole or cut into pieces, that we **re**-membered—that is sewn back together through the power of Christ's love.

Jesus makes his point strongly when he says that if we remember that someone has something against us we should leave our gift at the altar and go and attempt to be reconciled first before offering our gift. This is an act of **re**-membering them back into the Body of Christ. It is important that we realize that it doesn't depend on whether *we think* we have injured someone. If it comes to our attention that someone has *the perception* of having been injured by us—then we are to seek them out.

Every Sunday, our liturgy tries to help us in this regard. We hear the Word of God, we say the general confession, we receive absolution, and before coming to the altar to receive communion, we offer the Peace to our brothers and sisters gathered here. All's well, right? Well, unfortunately, we all know that reconciliation is often not that easy and is costly. Jesus is telling us that anger--that slow brewing, simmering type of anger and resentment--is one of the most virulent diseases of the soul and we should much more worried about catching that than the cold germs on the communion cup!

Each Sunday we are asked to examine the condition of our hearts (the Collect for Purity helps us with that) and take a look at where healing and reconciliation is most needed. When the crowds first gathered around Jesus to hear his teachings they would have been astounded—and so should we—when he said that pursuing reconciliation is far more important and urgent than making a sacrifice or an offering at the temple altar.

But when we look at the world around us, we know Jesus is right and today he reminds us to take the first step. We begin by carefully examining the role anger—either expressed or suppressed—is playing in our lives. We cannot heal what we cannot allow ourselves to feel and appropriately express. The second step is to reach out to a friend, stranger, parishioner or loved one to which you are estranged and, in so far as it is possible and doesn't place you or the person in grave harm, seek reconciliation. This is the greatest offering you and I can ever give God.

And lastly, please sign up for our new Wednesday night series, "Disunity in Christ," where we will dive more deeply into this vitally important subject, uncovering the hidden forces that keep us apart and bring us back together again. Amen.