Sermon 2-16-20

Paul Purdue preaching

Last week, I preached about how Jesus said “If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.”  So if two or three of us here at Belmont see it one way, but two or three folks across town see it another way, perhap only God can be living and active in two rival theological camps. Just after the service, Jermone Del Pino Junior, asked me a question that  has hung with me all week: What about God’s anger? Jermome shared how it had been maybe 15 years since he had heard a sermon about God’s anger: “What about God’s anger when anyone mistreats any of God’s children?” There is tension in knowing how the church at times does harm while believing God still works through broken churches.   And yet, when the church divided by prefered language and empire into Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic in 1054 I imagine God grieved that we rebuilt a cultural dividing wall that Christ had torn down, but God did not abandon one church for the other. (Ephessians 2:14) In 1521, when Martin Luther suggested 95 reforms and was excommunicated for theology, God traveled with the protesting movement and remained present in the cathloic church.  (John 17:21) I am sure God wept when the Methodist Espical Church South, stood with a slaveholding bishop instead of breaking bonds of oppression, nevertheless God prevenient grace persisted. (Isaiah 58) On Acklen Avenue our limestone lettering still bears a graven legacy of that sinfulness.

Can Love get angry? Can parents grow angry with their child while loving, nurturing and blessing them?  Can prophets speak harsh truths in hopes of purging toxic theology and sinful practise from Christ’s Church?  Monday morning I woke up pondering a theology of anger. I jotted down some notes before I filled my coffee cup. I sat with a Bible app reading the 20 verses in the New Testament about anger and scanning the 210 in the Old Testament. Once in the office, I pondered changing my sermon theme and Scripture. I hate to do this to Gayle, Amy, Kate, Heather and Darren who weave such wonderful music and liturgy around the texts creating an amazing worship flow. The scheduled baptismal question was “According to the grace given to you, will you remain faithful members of Christ’s holy church and serve as Christ’s representatives in the world?” In an angry world, can we be angry and represent Christ?  I circled back to lectionary passage which reads:

*You have heard, Don’t commit murder and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother, sister or sibling will be in spiritual danger. … If you say, ‘You fool,’ you risk hell fire. Therefore, if you come to worship and there remember that your sibling has something against you, leave your gifts at the altar and go be reconciled. First make things right with your sibling in Christ and then come back and offer your gift to God.*

Can we hear Jesus’ voice with so much anger swirling around us?  The Book of James tells us our words can unleash hell’s fire into the world, “*so, be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. An angry person doesn’t produce God’s righteousness.”* (James 1 & 3)  Later Monday, I stepped out of Fido and bumped into Rev Steve Bryant. I shared Jerome’s question about holiness and anger.  We affirmed in our lives anger had blocked something spiritual inside us. Steve noted how praying for our enemies transforms anger.  Steve left me with a question: What does it mean to be reconciled with rival Methodist camps now and if we experience a denominational divorce?

Let us not dismiss anger as unspiritual, The Bible speaks of God’s anger when we fail to love those on the margins.  The prophet Jeremiah thunders: “I *hate your religious festivals. Your worship services are a burden to me... I won’t listen. Come clean! Learn to do good. Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan;  plead for the widow*.”  Jesus thunders “*Watch out for the legal experts. They like to walk around in long robes. They love to be greeted with honor…. They cheat widows out of their homes, while saying long prayers. They will be judged most harshly.*  (Mark 12)  Those seem like burns!

Mark 3, tells us that Jesus grew angry. Jesus is angry and grieved at our unyielding hearts, as church leaders preferred safe theology and tradition to compassion and healing.  Jesus pushes us :“what is legal; to do good or to do evil, to save life or to do harm?” The experts refused to enter into dialogue with Jesus. They say nothing, sticking with the law. “Looking around at them with anger, Jesus was deeply grieved at their unyielding hearts.”

Nothing stirs me up like someone hurting one of my children.  Do you know that anger when someone hurts someone you deeply love?  Could those flashes of anger arise from the image of God within us? Would we be angrier if I thought of every child as a child of God?

So what about anger?   Searching the Scriptures I landed in Colossians and Ephesians. I think Paul knew something about anger management? If you read Paul’s letters you see Paul getting irritated with “super apostles”, hypocritical theology, and the forces of exclusion. You will see Paul arrested, beaten, belittled, dragged out of town, pelted with stones, falsely accused, and arrested. Paul fires off  “I opposed Peter to his face….” (Galatians 2) Paul never sat in an endowed chair anywhere, but lived as a church planter, and prophet of inclusion, who knew church battles, conflicts and wounds. And yet,Paul who once breathed murderous threats would come to write the most inspired poetry: “If I speak with the tongues of poets and angels, but have not love, I am nothing,... Only faith, hope and love remain and the greatest of these is Love.”   Maybe Paul can teach us about anger, truth, love and community.

 In Colossians Three, Paul speaks about anger in the context of church community. “*Now set aside anger, rage, malice, slander, and obscene language. Don’t lie to each other… as God’s beloved put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other. If someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other, as the Lord forgave you!  And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.*”   Paul talks about anger in the context of a community. Paul calls for forgiveness, tolerance, and naming complaints.  Paul warns the church about anger but cautions us not to lie to each other. Could Paul be saying, don’t slander or rage, but don’t put a sunny fake spin on it either?

 The linking of anger, love and truth-telling is clearer in Ephessians Four: “D*on’t be infants blown around by deceitful schemes and outright misdirections. ... Instead, speak the truth with love, grow into the way of Christ, and build up the church with love!  And after you have gotten rid of lying, each of you must tell the truth to your neighbor because we are parts of each other in the same body. Be angry without sinning. Don't let the sun set on your anger.  Don’t provide an opportunity for the devil.”* Hear the command forms: Speak the truth with love! Get rid of lying. Tell the truth to each other. Why tell the truth to each other, because we are in this thing together. And in telling the truth, and getting deeper into community, be angry without sinning.

We are commanded to tell the truth to each other.  Churches love to pretend things are okay, when they are not. We treat anger as a personal issue and ignore the societal injustices that may drive it.   I grew up in a lovely warmhearted church that never spoke about the sin of racism or economic injustice or judging, or if we did, the warning was served up with such gentleness and care so as to make sure that no one got offended. Frankly, It was okay to be a subtly racist, but if someone dared shout out about racism, well that would be decried as terrible and unspiritual. As a teenager, I remember reading in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” and thinking, that seems to be about race! And then thinking nah, no way Purdue, someone would have said that if it was!  It was about class, gender and race!

In our passage Paul tells the church: Stop lying. Stop pretending everything is okay.  Speak the truth with love! Get rid of a sunny kind of lying. Tell the truth to each other. Because you are one body, don’t ignore the wounds within the body.   Be angry without sinning. How do we do that?

If the church, family, or community if we hear the angry voices that may help us work through the anger. I am not advocating drinking is some disconnected persons rage, malice, slander or abuse.  But hearing an angry neighbor may help us know the truth that sets us free. That difficult dialogue might move us beyond a phony surface affection into a deeper love that helps breaks bonds of oppression and heals wounds of despair.  Surely, there are times we must shake the dust off our feet and move on, without again casting our hearts before swine to be re-trampled, but hearing an angry word might bring healing to us and the one experiencing the anger. (Matthew 7:6 & 10:14)

When Lewis, who was our complaint child, got angry, which was not often, you had to sit with him.  At times like so many wounded by the church, Lewis would walk away and sit alone. Love goes to the angry ones. Love pursues those who have walked away. Love sits silently with the wounded. Connie would say, “find your words baby”, and with time, his tight careful face would loosen with tears. Often our anger masks tears.  Who wants to cry in front of those who have hurt us. Who wants to appear weak, when they feel they have lost. Anger is safer. Silence too! Love listens. Love absorbs. Love yields. Love does not allow the wounded to sit alone.

When we hear another’s story, we may be transformed by their tears and anger. Let us not forget Jesus grew angry.  Like surgery can remove a terrible cancer, the truth can hurt as it heals us. God can use our empathic listening and yielding hearts to heal the speaker. The truth must always change how we live.

My heart yields each time I read Doctor King’s letter from a Birmingham Jail: Let me take note of my other major disappointment. I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions… but I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church… . I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents… all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows. …  On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious-education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when… “ That stings my privilege, but maybe it is a healing inoculation against my current complacency. Maybe I need to hear more from the prophets of non-violence and inclusion and their angerer incarnations. Maybe I need to listen more, speak less, and be slow to anger? Maybe I need to check my words against a standard of Christ’s love? Maybe I need to encourage those who have left or don’t feel safe to even enter the conversation to speak up. Maybe there will be healing in that conversation, and help us better represent Christ, who brought healing everywhere,  within this angry world?

Speak the truth with love! Get rid of lying. Tell the truth to each other. We are in this thing together. And truth-telling the truth and anger without sinning, can heal the body. Being a place that listens might even bring back those who have given up on the church as a place of truth telling.  Amen.