

"Imitators of God"
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 18, 2017

First Scripture Reading: Matthew 7:1-5

¹"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ²For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

Second Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

²⁵So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

⁵ ¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.



Sermon: *"Imitators of God"*

In August 2010, Steven Slater, a long-time flight attendant with Jet Blue Airlines, decided he had had enough. While boarding passengers on a flight from Pittsburgh to New York, he had tried to help a passenger put a bag in the overhead bin. The bag was too big and would eventually have to be checked. But in the struggle to force it into the bin, the bag had fallen hitting him in the head, causing a small gash. Later, after the flight landed, and while Slater was midway through his Welcome-to-New-York spiel on the intercom, that same passenger, apparently still angry about having to check the bag, began to berate him, loudly and profanely.

According to CNN: "With the PA microphone already in hand ... he thanked the 'respectful' passengers on board but not the woman who Slater said had called him a curse word ... [Then he] grabbed a few beers from the beverage cart, looked outside, opened the emergency evacuation slide and slid down. He described his thoughts at the time as a combination of 'pure rage' and serenity and clarity that 'I didn't need to do this anymore.'"

Slater took his ride down the chute. Walked across the tarmac to the parking lot, got in his car and drove home. I guess if you're going to get mad and quit a job, there's no reason you can't do it with some style.

The only problem is that what Slater did was illegal. A few hours later, police arrived at his home to arrest him.¹

Slater's "Take-this-job-and-shove-it" attitude turned him into a bit of a folk hero. Other flight attendants who've gotten angry with troublesome passengers expressed admiration for one of their own who had done something many of them admit having fantasized about.²

But public expressions of anger don't always have such a humorous, feel-good outcome. Last week, an Illinois man took his anger out on republican congressmen and their aids who were gathered to practice for a charity baseball game. Early reports are that he had expressed anger about the actions and policies of Congress and of the current administration.³

One thing that made me angry about the whole thing was that instead of coming together and talking about how to stop things like this from happening, almost immediately after news of the shooting broke, some Democratic officials were blaming Republicans and "the Right" while some Republican officials were busy blaming Democrats and "the Left."⁴

Anger and righteous indignation seem to have taken the place of cooperation and thoughtful discourse. But as one blogger has written "We live in a time when many people view civility and thoughtful discussion as weakness – and acting out [in] anger, [as] a virtuous example of strength."⁵

It's in this context that we read Paul's words to the church in Ephesus. In his letter, Paul has addressed behaviors he feels are inappropriate for a church called to bear witness to Jesus Christ. And prominent among the things he addresses is anger. But what's really interesting, is that he doesn't say anger is a bad thing.

Paul writes "Be angry but do not sin." Then, several verses later, he writes "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath, and anger..."

That may sound like a contradiction, but it's not.

¹ CNN Wire Staff. "Ex-flight Attendant Blames 'perfect Storm of Bad Manners' for Outburst." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 27 Oct. 2010. Web. 19 June 2017.

<<http://www.cnn.com/2010/TRAVEL/10/26/flight.attendant.lkl/index.html>>.

² Robinson, Heather. "Interview With a Flight Attendant on Steven Slater's Rant and Escape." *TheHuffingtonPost.com*. The Huffington Post, 11 Aug. 2010. Web. 19 June 2017.

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/heather-robinson/interview-with-a-flight-a_b_679246.html>.

³ Marimow, Ann E., Patricia Sullivan, Shawn Boburg, and Tom Jackman. "Emerging Portrait of Shooting Suspect James T. Hodgkinson: Anti-Trump Rhetoric on Social Media, Repeat Visits to YMCA near Virginia Ballfield." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, 14 June 2017. Web. 19 June 2017.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/law-enforcement-officials-identify-shooter-at-congressional-ballgame-as-illinois-man/2017/06/14/ba6439f4-510f-11e7-91eb-9611861a988f_story.html?utm_term=.c4e9c29b7e59>.

⁴ Werner, Erica. "Trump Says Scalise." *The Columbus Dispatch*. The Columbus Dispatch, 15 June 2017. Web. 19 June 2017. <<http://www.dispatch.com/news/20170615/trump-says-scalise-in-some-trouble-as-house-gavels-back-in>>.

⁵ Golden, Bernard. "What Constitutes "Healthy Anger"?" *Psychology Today*. Sussex Publishers, 17 Aug. 2016. Web. 19 June 2017. <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/overcoming-destructive-anger/201608/what-constitutes-healthy-anger>>.

When he writes “Be angry,” that is not an imperative. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates these verse as “Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don’t use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don’t stay angry.”⁶

For Paul, anger is a natural part of the human experience but, it has to be dealt with in a way that reflects the love of God and God’s claim on our lives. In all that we do, we are to be imitators of God, and that includes when we are angry.

Now it’s hard to miss the fact that in the Old Testament God does get angry from time to time. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah knew about that as did the kings of Israel and Juda. Isaiah and Jeremiah and several others of the prophets spend a great deal of time trying to communicate God’s anger to the people.

But being “Imitators of God” does not mean that we are allowed to lash out against people out of righteous anger. Because even in anger, the overarching characteristics of God are love and compassion. That’s sort of what Paul is getting at here.

In this passage, Paul notes that we are to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you.” We are not to be imitators of God in power and violence; we are to imitate God in how our anger always gives way to love and forgiveness.

See, anger is not always a bad thing. Anger can motivate us to work for change. Anger can drive us to overcome obstacles.

I remember once my mother was shopping in a store called Petite Sophisticate. As the name implies, it was a store for smaller women. One of the sales clerks looked her up and down and said to her, “Oh I’m sorry ma’am, we don’t have anything in here to fit you.” My mother got angry. But that anger inspired her to work hard to lose weight and then she went back and shopped in that same store.

Anger can also be healthy in relationships if expressed constructively.

One of the most challenging things about relationships in general and marriage - in particular - is dealing with competing expectations. I was reading *Dear Abby* in the paper the other day, and a soon-to-be-bride was asking advice on how to get her fiancé to shower more. She expected that daily was not too much to ask. He seemed to feel that twice a month was adequate.⁷

I do a lot of premarital counseling with couples, and I have found that it’s not unusual for a couple to have very different expectations about what married life will be like. Sometimes that can lead to conflict when expectations do not meet reality, and that can lead to disappointment and anger.

But, as one psychologist notes, “[If] you hide [that] anger, your partner doesn’t know they’ve done something wrong. And so, they keep doing it. And that doesn’t do your relationship any good. The

⁶ Peterson, Eugene H. "Ephesians 4:26-27." *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language, with Topical Concordance*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005. Print.

⁷ Van Buren, Abigail. "Woman Keeps Smelly Fiance at Arm's Length." *Uexpress.com/dearabby*. Andrews McMeel Universal, 6 June 2017. Web. 19 June 2017. <<http://www.uexpress.com/dearabby/2017/6/6/1/woman-keeps-smelly-fiance-at-arms>>.

expression of anger, if justifiable and aimed at finding a solution rather than just venting, can actually benefit and strengthen relationships.”⁸

And it’s the same thing in the public realm. Anger expressed constructively can lead to change. The Civil Rights Movement was an example of constructive expressions of anger that led to real change for the better.

The narrative that drove the election cycle of 2016 was that voters were angry and were looking for a change in Washington.

Political Scientist Kathy Cramer argues that rural voters especially felt like government wasn’t working for people like them. After many months of talking with and studying the opinions of rural voters in Wisconsin, she reported that “Just about all of her subjects felt a deep sense of bitterness toward elites and city dwellers; just about all of them felt tread on, disrespected and cheated out of what they felt they deserved[:]... their fair share of decision-making power... public resources... [and]... respect.”⁹

And maybe *there is* reason to be angry. There seems to be an ever-increasing wealth gap and the recovery from the recent recession has still not reached some parts of the country. And it sometimes seems like injustice and inequality are becoming the norm.

Jesus preached against things like that. He got angry and overturned the tables of the moneychangers because he didn’t like the Temple becoming a marketplace, but also because the moneychangers were hurting the most vulnerable people in society: those who had no other choice but to pay for goods and services from people who were cheating them.

That sort of injustice angered Jesus and it angers many people today and it should anger the Church.

For better or worse, society seems to be angrier than I remember. And that anger has wrought some frightening things. But anger doesn’t have to be a negative. Anger speaks to the fact that something is wrong. Just like pain, though uncomfortable, indicates there is something wrong in the body, anger should be a sign that something is wrong in our lives or in society that needs to be addressed. The danger is in ignoring that anger or trying to squelch it in a quest for happiness or peace, or - as we see so often in politics - manipulating it for political or economic gain.

There are a lot of things that make us angry. We get angry when we are hurt by someone else or when we see people we love hurt. We get angry when we are frustrated by our own inability to achieve goals or fulfill our own desires. We get angry when we see injustice being done.

Anger is a natural response to any and all of these things. But as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are intended to be imitators of God and our lives are made to be characterized by love and compassion.

⁸ Dean, Jeremy. "The Upside of Anger: 6 Psychological Benefits of Getting Mad." *PsyBlog*. Dr. Jeremy Dean, 6 Mar. 2012. Web. 19 June 2017. <<http://www.spring.org.uk/2012/03/the-upside-of-anger-6-psychological-benefits-of-getting-mad.php>>.

⁹ Guo, Jeff. "A New Theory for Why Trump Voters Are so Angry - That Actually Makes Sense." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, 08 Nov. 2016. Web. 19 June 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/11/08/a-new-theory-for-why-trump-voters-are-so-angry-that-actually-makes-sense/?utm_term=.1a7990521735>.

Anger must be an inspiration to change something about ourselves or the world around us. Anger must push us to act in constructive ways. Anger *can't* become a weapon and it can't become a security blanket to assure us that we are right and they are wrong.

When we are hurt by someone else, anger must inspire us not to lash back in revenge, but to speak up for ourselves and for what we need.

When we see people we love hurt, anger must evolve into courage to step forward and come to their aid. Maybe that means intervening in an ongoing situation, but it more likely means tending to, and caring for the one who has been hurt.

When we are frustrated by the way things are and our inability to achieve our own goals, anger should drive us to do better, work harder, and find creative ways to overcome the obstacles in our path.

When we see injustice being done, anger must drive us to do what is right. Blind rage that lashes out at those who do wrong, whether on our own behalf or on behalf of someone else, might make us feel better and more powerful, but typically it also results in an escalation of the conflict. Other people don't like feeling powerless either.

Anger is a natural part of the human experience. But we can't be afraid of it. We must face it. That means addressing the person with whom you are angry. It means not allowing anger to fester by refusing to deal with it. It means talking about what bothers us. Professional, licensed counselors are excellent for this.

Getting angry is not wrong - but staying angry, living in anger, dwelling on anger is. Anger is a brief stop on the journey, not a place to move-in and stay for a while. That's what Paul means when he writes "Do not let the sun go down on your anger." It should empower us, inspire us, and maybe even embarrass us, to take the next step.

But the heart of what Paul writes here is that anger should not control us. What should guide our actions in all things, even when we're angry... *especially* when we're angry, is the love and compassion of God.

And that is something to remember the next time you watch the news or drive in rush hour traffic.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.