

"Imitators of God"
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 1, 2018

First Scripture Lesson: 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.

Introduction:

Today we're going to talk about anger. In my conversations with many of you, I hear anger at the way the world is, at many of the decisions being made by our government, at the way evil and injustice seems to keep happening. But also, on a personal level, I hear from folks that they get angry with their spouses or their adult children and they aren't quite sure how to deal with that. Well, this passage from Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus addresses the proper place of anger in our lives.

Second Scripture Lesson: 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 Therefore 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 tried to help a passenger put a bag in the overhead bin. In the struggle to make the bag fit, it had fallen, hitting him in the head, causing a small gash. Because the bag was too big, they had to go ahead and check it. Later, after the flight landed, Slater was midway through his Welcome-to-New-York spiel on the intercom when that same passenger, apparently angry about having had to check the bag, began to heckle 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 aren't always so humorous or harmless. I'm assuming most of you have heard about this week's ruckus over the Red Hen. Columnist Marsha Mercer writes a nice summary in the Lynchburg, VA News and Advance:

"[Restaurant owner Stephanie Wilkinson decided] to take a stand against the 'inhumane and unethical' Trump administration by refusing to serve White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders. The over-reaction on both sides rolled in like lava in Hawaii — fiery, swift and destructive.

*"Tens of thousands of tweets in support of and against the Red Hen, including an angry one from President Donald Trump. Calls for more shaming and for more civility. Protests and counter-protests, and an arrest of a man who threw chicken dung at the restaurant. All this in just three days."*³

It seems that anger and righteous indignation have taken the place of cooperation and thoughtful discourse. 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."⁴

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. When he writes "Be angry," that is not a command. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates this 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."⁵

You see, Anger is a brief stop on the journey, not a place to move in and stay for a while.

Psychologists tell us there are four core human emotions: joy, sadness, fear, and anger. Anger is a natural part of the human experience. And Paul seems to understand this, but he argues that anger 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. So did the kings of Israel and Judah and the prophets. Isaiah and Jeremiah and several others spend a great deal of time trying to warn the people that God is getting angry at them. 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 [us]." 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 get in better shape and then she went back to that same store and bought a whole bunch of stuff.

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.⁶

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 expression of anger, if justifiable and aimed at finding a solution rather than just venting, can actually benefit and strengthen relationships."⁷

We often experience anger, whether our own or someone else's anger as a negative. But anger isn't necessarily unhealthy. Anger speaks to the fact that's something is wrong. Physical pain is uncomfortable, but it tells us there is something wrong with our bodies. Anger should be seen the same way: as a sign that something is wrong in our lives or in society that we need to address. The real danger lies in ignoring our anger and trying to stifle it in a quest for happiness or peace.

There are a lot of things that make me angry. When someone tries to hurt me or someone I love. When I fail at something important. When I see people in power abusing that power. When injustice is done. Those things might make you angry, too. Anger is a natural response to all of those things. But what Paul tells us here is that disciples of Jesus Christ are intended to be *imitators of God* and our lives are made to be characterized by love and compassion.

Jesus got angry! Remember him storming through the temple and turning over the tables of the money changers? He was angry because they had turned God's house into a den of thieves. They were preying on the poor; cheating them by jacking up the cost of sacrificial animals and charging exorbitant rates to exchange money for paying the temple tax for which most foreign currency was invalid. But Jesus didn't stay angry. And we can't either. Anger is a brief stop on the journey, not a place to move in and stay for a while.

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 you and your spouse disagree, talk about it, work through it. Don't go to sleep on that anger.

When you are hurt by someone else, or when you see the people you love being hurt, anger must inspire you, not to lash back in revenge, but to speak up, step forward, take a stand.

When you fail, anger should drive you to get back up and try again.

When you get frustrated by the way things are, anger should inspire you to work for positive change.

When you see injustice being done, anger must drive you to do what is right. Blind rage that lashes out at those who do wrong might make you feel better and more powerful, but typically it also results in an escalation of the conflict. Other people don't like being made to feel powerless, either.

Anger is a natural part of the human experience. But we can't be afraid of it. We have to face it. That means calmly, respectfully, and with kindness 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 angry, 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, or maybe even embarrass us, to take the next step. But it shouldn't 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.

Quitting your job in a blaze of defiance, kicking the face of the current administration out of your restaurant, flaming away at someone with whom you disagree on social media all might make you feel better in the short run, but none of those things makes the world a better place; none of those things helps usher in the Kingdom of God. None of those things makes us imitators of God.

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

End Notes

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 Mercer, Marsha. "Social Media's Menu of Anger." *NewsAdvance.com*, The News and Advance, 1 July 2018, www.newsadvance.com/opinion/columnists/mercer_marsha/social-media-s-menu-of-anger/article_44f0ad4e-7be1-11e8-b047-2f8094d129c0.html.

⁴ 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>>.

⁵ Peterson, Eugene H. "Ephesians 4:26-27." *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language, with Topical Concordance*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005. Print.

⁶ 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>>.

⁷ 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>>.