

Exodus 32: 19-24

The Limits of Wrath

Sunday January 26, 2014

Rev. Susan Cartmell

The Congregational Church of Needham

During January and February we are going to be talking about Good and Evil. For this series of sermons we will examine one of the Seven Deadly Sins. People of faith have often pondered how hard it is to be good, and especially how hard it is to avoid evil. Even good people – people of virtue by any standard- wrestle with temptation. We know from scripture that Jesus’ disciples often asked him “How good do you have to be?” That is a question that people have pondered for centuries. One of the early popes designed a list of sins you should strive to avoid and then in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Dante wrote about the Seven Deadly Sins. While this list of temptations has been part of Western culture for centuries now, we don’t talk about them all that much in this church. For that matter we don’t preach very many sermons about sin from this pulpit.

But each week we acknowledge that life can be challenging. If you want to get the most out of life you need to be intentional about your goals and your motivations. You need to guard against those things that may look good but will waste your time. For these two months all the sermons will be about the Seven Deadly Sins, which are still relevant contemporary temptations that we all face. Our series includes Pride, Sloth, Wrath, Greed, Lust, Envy, and Gluttony. No matter how modern our sensibilities, there is something about temptation that fascinates us.

In 1976 in the movie “Network” one man said “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.” People forgot the movie, but not **that** line. We all talk about the terrible twos and regale one another with stories of our children’s temper tantrums. We are fascinated and appalled at the way they

throw themselves on the floor and pound their fists. People never forget John McEnroe throwing his tennis racket. Folks tune into Jerry Springer's show to watch grown-ups lose their grip on decorum and throw chairs around. All those wrestling shows that command a huge audience on cable television offer an avenue for people who identify with wrestlers who have a lot of rage. Even when most of us see that the whole sport is not real, thousands of people enjoy the sport of wrestling because it shows such potent rage.

Today our topic is Anger. Let's see what the Bible has to tell us about this basic human emotion. In the first place the Bible says you need to respect your anger.

The Bible does not shy away from anger. In the story we read today Moses had a fit. He had been working on the Ten Commandments and was delayed on Mount Sinai. When he finished the project of writing the Ten Commandments, he returned to his people only to discover that the people had forgotten him. Moses was not calm or measured. In one of the most famous temper tantrums of all history Moses smashed the Tablets and that was just the beginning of his rant.

Not only is anger normal, but it is natural. Sometimes it is a gift. When people see injustice or feel that they have been wronged, anger can motivate them to stand up for their rights or challenge authority. Without anger there would have been no abolitionists. Without anger there would have been no suffrage movement. Without anger there would be no child labor laws, no Civil Rights movement, and no commitment to stop bullying in all its vicious forms. When good people feel angry there is often a reason for it. But anger can also be a problem. We have all seen it. Players can explode at referees in the heat of a game, after a series of questionable call. Drivers get so angry in traffic that we have a name for it- road rage. Lover's quarrels can turn to angry outbursts or violent fights. Postal workers slighted at work can nurse a boiling resentment.

The Bible does not tell us to sublimate our anger but to be aware of it. Many of us grew up in homes where anger was frowned upon. It was not encouraged in conversations. It was not tolerated at the dinner table. It was bottled up. In many cases when it did come out it was explosive. Anger that is ignored can be difficult to contain.

Finally managing your anger is a life-long challenge. Moses needs an anger management coach. He seems to bottle it up until he explodes. His was not an easy life, but then who can claim an easy life? Moses ignores his anger until it consumes him. He lived in the palace and watched Egyptians beating Hebrews. One day he snapped. You cannot tell me that this was the first injustice he saw growing up in the palace. He probably repressed it until he was homicidal.

In 2003 Jack Nicholson and Adam Sandler starred in a movie entitled Anger Management. It is the story of a mild-mannered man who has a lot of rage which he has sublimated. The story is silly but it tells us to be aware of our feelings. You cannot ignore them, or they take on a life of their own. Anger that is never expressed can turn into seething resentment, or depression.

There are plenty of times when we feel angry because life has not been fair, or so it seems. We all feel frustrated and hurt and angry from time to time.

- How can the company where I work treat me like this after I have been loyal all these years?
- How can my family fail to see how giving I was all those years when times were hard?
- Where are my friends when I need them? Have they forgotten my many kindnesses?
- I hate that he/she cannot see all I have done for them.

No one sees how I have suffered.

Anger is a guest in all of our homes. It comes with its luggage and takes space in our guest room. If we forget about it, it will become insistent, over bearing, rude. If we ignore it then anger may jump out and make us sarcastic, or depressed, or sleep-deprived. It is part of the family, so we best learn to live with it.

Self-righteous anger is toxic at some level. When our own pain gets tangled up with what we imagine to be God's agenda then we can get onto a high horse indeed. When we think we know what is best, or what is God's will then wrath becomes pretty lethal. It is hard to reason with a self-righteous person because they knew better than anyone. They don't take prisoners; they want blood.

This week I visited someone in her apartment in an assisted living community nearby and we were talking about her husband who died many years ago. She was honest and open about his death, and admitted to me that she is sure that anger killed him. He was so upset and furious about an unresolved situation in his company that he had a fatal heart attack.

In one famous study of 13,000 people with high levels of anger, they were at twice the risk for coronary artery disease, and three times the risk for heart attack. Some scientists think chronic anger may be more dangerous than smoking and obesity. Most psychologists believe that anger is at the base of many cases of depression and anxiety. { <http://science.howstuffworks.com/life/inside-the-mind/emotions/anger2.htm>. } I would like to recommend a website How Stuff Works .com. How Anger Works.

How we manage anger ? How do we make friends with it. How do we acknowledge that anger is here to stay, in the fabric of our lives? I think we have this story because here we learn that Moses had a lot to learn. It is a life-long challenge and a vital skill for all of us. Many wise people over time have written about anger.

Mitch Albom wrote in his bestseller- The Five People You Meet in Heaven: “Learn this from me- Holding anger is poison. We think that our hatred hurts others. But it is a curved blade and the harm we do, we do to ourselves.”

Toni Morrison said in an interview: “Anger is a paralyzing emotion. You cannot get anything done. People think it is interesting or passionate. I don’t think it is any of that. It is helpless, it’s the absence of control. I need all my skills and power.”

Aristotle – “Anybody can become angry- that is easy but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time, and for the right purpose, in the right way- that is not within everyone’s power and it is not easy.”

I would add that it is possible to practice being angry for the right reasons, and at the right people and in the right moment. God gives us opportunities every day to work with our anger. Temper is the one thing you cannot get rid of by losing it. We will all be blessed with many opportunities throughout our lives. Hopefully we will do better than Moses did.