

# “Put It Away!”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – August 9, 2009*

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Psalm 130:4-12; Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2

Last week, my son and I were returning home from a visit to the park. Jack was on his tricycle – one of those with a handle on the back – and I was walking behind him. A car began backing out of the driveway on the other side of the street, but then stopped, which I assumed to mean that the driver saw us and was waiting until we were clear; apparently not. As we walked, and pedaled along, behind the car, he started backing up again. Seeing this, I propelled Jack forward, out of the way. The SUV finally stopped to change gears from reverse into drive about a foot in front of me. Upset, I yelled “hey!” banged on the rear window, and gave the driver – or at least the back of his head – my best look of irritation.

Within seconds, it was all over, the car drove off, Jack and I continued on toward home, but anger stayed with me for a while. I was confident that this was an example of righteous anger. I was upset with the driver, that he either was not paying more attention or didn’t care about the safety of pedestrians. But there was neither then nor would there be in the future a confrontation with the driver – he was long gone. I was also upset with the fact that while most of the streets in Chagrin Falls have sidewalks, the last two blocks leading to my house do not. But while I believe sidewalks would be great for me and for the whole community, I did not march straight down to the Village Hall and demand that they be installed.

Anger is a big topic these days. A recent search on Amazon.com showed over 40,000 book titles, just in the Christian literature section. That’s a lot of writing about anger! Anger is indeed part of being human and that part of our humanity reaches into our lives as Christians and part of the body of Christ. But part of being the church is to be a community of reconciliation; as Paul Marshall says, "The reconciled community must practice reconciliation especially when this frightening emotion is raised, and that reconciliation begins with naming it."<sup>1</sup>

You sometimes hear people say, "Oh, he’s refreshingly candid," or "You always know where she stands," or "She always speaks her mind." It is true that our feelings of anger – especially when it is righteous anger – ought to be expressed within the church, as the writer to the Ephesians advises them. But, as much as we might admire honesty and candor, they can also be frightening qualities: as in, “you always know where he stands,” or “she always speaks her mind.”

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Kate Huey in *Weekly Seeds*, August 2009

In one sense, we should be free to bring our anger to church. Christ told us that he came not for those who are well, but for those who are sick; he came to help sinners like us. And, although anger is not itself a sin, its results and effects can certainly be. Thus, today's reading from Ephesians teaches, "Be angry, but do not sin...Do not let the sun go down on your anger." Because, if we admit and address our angry feelings at the time they surface (or as soon after as possible), we can still act in a loving fashion. This is what was called, earlier in this letter, speaking the truth in love; being honest but also seeking to build one another up, rather than tear others down. Therefore, we'd be naive if we expected church to be a place of continual sweetness and affirmation.<sup>2</sup> At times, anger will surface and be expressed; but growth and reconciliation will also be sought and sometimes achieved.

The Letter of Ephesians is about life-altering conversion; contrasting life in Christ with life before Christ. "Before Christ, we were individualistic, grabbing all we could get for ourselves from others with the minimal amount of effort, expressing anger when we didn't get what we wanted. After Christ, we no longer live for ourselves, but are part of a community, working to help those who cannot help themselves."<sup>3</sup> This is what it means to put away our anger; not to tuck it away somewhere deep within us so that it will come out again at an inappropriate time and place, but to let it go like we let our old lives go; those things we thought and did and said before we came to know Christ. And when, at those times that it seems to resurface along with the residuals like bitterness and wrath, then we need to consciously separate ourselves from it again; don't let it linger; don't let it negatively affect our relationships with others.

If we truly belong to one another and to the Body of Christ, how can we accept, for example, when there is bitterness and wrath and slander taking place between one another through angry words and actions? When we act out of anger, we hurt ourselves in a very real sense; for we are members of the body, and as the members of a body, we should not hurt each other.

Many times, in the Old Testament especially, we hear of God's anger. Some of those times, we can understand God's anger, but other times, it is beyond our ability to comprehend. The Bible proclaims not only that God can be angry, but also that God is perfect love. As God's enfleshed representative on earth, Jesus also displays righteous anger. When he heals the man with the withered hand in the synagogue, Jesus is angry at the religious officials not only because they show no concern for human suffering, but because they criticize him for "working," for healing on the Sabbath while the Jewish leaders themselves are "at

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Stroble, "Kindly Candor" from *christiancentury.org*

<sup>3</sup> Teresa Lockhart Stricklen in *Lectioary Homiletics*, August 2006.

work” plotting Jesus’ death. Because Jesus loves the man with the withered hand, and because Jesus loves God and the vision of peaceful kingdom, Jesus is angry at any who would obstruct compassion and plot against his life. But, despite his anger, Jesus also loves those who plot against him – if they would repent and work for goodness instead of injustice.

Appropriate anger is that which seeks to reconcile wrongs, not to compound the suffering of the wrong-doer. It seeks to call the wrong to attention and rectify that wrong to the extent that is possible. It points to the wrong done, not the wrong-doer. But if the wrong is not addressed, if appropriate anger remains bottled up inside, then it tends to be associated with the person. This is why even righteous anger is time-limited; why the sun should not set on it; because in time it begins to fan its own flames from within, until it begins to spew noxious fumes.<sup>4</sup>

The danger of letting the sun go down on your anger, again and again, is that in time, anger will become your default mode; and what you are most inclined to see in others is blameworthiness and unattractiveness. No more will you assume that mistakes are innocent or incidental, but instead that they define the offender. No longer is a driver who backs up without looking simply distracted but malicious. No longer is someone with whom you disagree in the church a good and faithful member of the body with a different opinion, but an enemy: someone who doesn’t like you, or doesn’t trust you, or doesn’t even want you in the body.

Of course, anger is not the only issue in addressed in this passage. Instead, it deals with all of our life choices. The author of Ephesians challenges us to imagine what it would be like if we made our decisions based not on whether choice A or B would bring us the best paycheck, highest status and most comfortable life, but whether it would allow us to serve those in need. The author suggests that Christians should have jobs primarily so that they can help others.<sup>5</sup>

But, you may say, we are a society and a culture that is taught to help ourselves first in order to ultimately help others. Therefore, we are taught to consider things like forgiveness of others in terms of what benefit it might have to us. Forgiving others of their mistakes – which is the antidote to holding on to anger – can relieve us of stress, it can free us to move forward in relationships, but we also do it because it is good for the body: not just our body, but also the body of Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Louise Bringle in *Lectionary Homiletics*, August 2006

<sup>5</sup> Jaime Clark-Soles in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 3

Why should we forgive? We could make a long list of possible psychological and sociological benefits, but – as the scriptures reveal to us today – it comes down to the fact that this is what God does in Christ. As God’s children, we do not just love God, praise God and thank God. We also aim to imitate God, first recognizing and then closing the gap between God’s behavior and our own. Because God sometimes shows righteous anger, we too can and probably should be angry at times as well. But God also forgives, meaning that if we are to be imitators of God, we must also seek to forgive. Notice how this is an active process – not easy – but one of constantly seeking to get closer and closer to the goal.

Just as we can never fully imitate God, we may never become completely free of anger and filled with forgiveness. But, if we make it a priority – if we actively try to find the anger that is within us and put it away – like the old clothing we put off when we are instead clothed with Christ’s compassion and kindness – then distance will grow between us and our anger.

Of course, we cannot imitate God on our own, for this we require God’s grace to give us the strength to undertake such imitation. That is why we are to come before God daily, so that the sun will not set on our anger; that is why we are to pray unceasingly, so that not a moment or a person passes that we are not seeking to forgive and reconcile; for our own sake – but even more for the sake of all that is One in Christ. AMEN.