

MORNING PRAYER
SIX SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY
07.28.19

At first glance, today's Second Lesson seems to demand the impossible. Anger is an emotion that simply rises up spontaneously within us. It is a reaction when someone pushes in front of us in line or cuts us off in traffic. Emotions come and go like the wind. We cannot control them by our thoughts or by any amount of will power. So how can Jesus hold us responsible for what we have no control over?

I would like to begin by making two observations. The first is that the little "loophole phrase" "without a cause" does not appear in the most ancient manuscripts available at this time. Many of those ancient manuscripts were not available to the scholars who produced the King James Translation. It appears to have been inserted by the Church for one of two reasons – either the Fathers realized that trying to control our emotions is futile, or, more likely, they wanted to make it clear that there are circumstances in which anger is justified. It is justified when directed against evil. It is justified when it arouses men to action in defense of helpless and innocent people. Jesus Himself felt and expressed just such anger. So He does not say that we should not ever be angry. He says we should not be angry with our fellow Christians.

And that leads me to the second observation, which also involves a certain amount of textual scholarship. I confess that I am not expert in that area. They tell me there is a word in Greek that refers to the kind of spontaneous flare-up that I mentioned earlier. That is not the word that appears in this text. The word that appears in this text refers to a different kind of anger – the kind that burns with a low flame for a long time and is carefully nurtured with fantasies of revenge. It is the kind of anger that is buried deep inside and often loaded up with displaced hostilities left over from other experiences. That kind of anger you can control and it is the kind of anger that Jesus forbids.

Suppressed feelings always find a way to come out in subtle ways and often play out in your relations with people who have nothing to do with their origin. It is well known, for example, that people who have been abused in childhood often become abusers themselves in later life. The anger that was suppressed at the time of the experience is carried around for many years and finally bursts out on some innocent victim such as a spouse or a child.

There are times when you want to respond to that person that wronged you with hurtful words. How many times have you said to yourself, “I will get even with you for that”? But you didn’t say it out loud and you didn’t do it. Instead you settled for an outward peace, which is not really a peace at all but merely a truce. You and your adversary continue to be polite to each other but suppressed feelings of anger and hostility lurk underneath.

Jesus says: “You have heard that it was said by the men of old, ‘You shall not kill, and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment’, but I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment.”

Carrying a grudge has a way of becoming itself the very judgement of which Jesus speaks. It eats away at the soul. It turns inward and expresses itself in things like drug or alcohol abuse, overeating, and social withdrawal. And it also has serious implications for the Church as a whole and for the mission of Jesus.

The Kingdom of God, which Jesus came to establish, is characterized by love and harmony. It demands mutual respect and integrity. Differences must be identified and resolved. What is wrong must be made right. Anger cannot simply be covered up and ignored. The underlying causes of it must be brought into the open and healed. Forgiveness cannot come about until that work is done.

Later in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus will outline a procedure for settling disputes in the Church. It begins by confronting in private the brother or sister who has done you wrong. You may not be successful in settling your grievance in a brotherly manner, but it is your duty to follow the procedure that Jesus has outlined. What you may not do is harbor resentment and think about how to get even.

You may not disrespect your brother by calling him names. Jesus says, **“Whoever insults his brother shall answer to the council, but whoever calls his brother a fool [which according the Psalms is someone who does not believe in God] will be in danger of hell fire.”** That’s how serious the matter is.

And it is not just your own anger that you have to deal with. You also have to deal with the anger you may have generated in others.

The offering of sacrifice was the central liturgical act of Jewish worship. Jesus says that your sacrifice will not be accepted if there is enmity between you and one of your fellow worshipers. You can’t just wait for your neighbor to come to you. You have to go to him and attempt a reconciliation. Right relationships are more important than right ritual acts. So Jesus says, **“If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go: first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”**

In saying this, Jesus places himself squarely in the tradition of the great Old Testament prophets. Listen for instance to the words of Amos as he speaks in behalf of God:

“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them.

Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

The central act of liturgical worship for us is Holy Communion. We cannot rightly participate in that sacrifice unless we are, as the invitation says, in love and charity with our neighbors. The prayer book rubrics, in fact, require the priest to deny communion to any members of the congregation between whom he perceives hatred to exist, and to report his action to the bishop. Such is the importance of the personal relationships that prevail in the Church.

If there are bad feelings between you and another member of the body of Christ, you must attempt a reconciliation. It doesn't matter who you think is right and who you think is wrong. You can't wait for the other person to make the first move. You must take the initiative. And above all, you dare not take your anger to the grave. You must settle the matter right now.

Jesus says, **“Make friends with your adversary quickly, while you are on your way to the court.”** You are in serious trouble if you appear before the judgment seat of God with anger and resentment in your heart. It will not go well for you.

When your anger is aroused by some personal affront, you cannot prevent the emotional reaction that you feel. But you can and must decide not to act upon it. You must let the emotion subside, and then find a way to forgive. The easiest way to do that is to ask for an apology, and be ready to give one if you are at fault. If you cannot get an apology, I find that the best thing is to pray for the person who has offended you. It's hard to remain angry with someone for whom you are praying.

Carrying your anger around with you and feeding it with thoughts of revenge is the one thing you must not do. It will destroy you if you do.

**“You have heard that it was said to the men of old,
“You shall not kill, and whoever kills shall be liable to
judgment.” But I say to you that every one who is angry
with his brother shall be liable to judgment.”**

LET US PRAY

**Deliver us, Lord, from bitterness and anger. Take away
from us the desire to hurt another, but fill us with the
mercy and compassion that brought Thee into the
world; for we have sinned and throw ourselves upon
Thy mercy. Grant that we may show mercy to those
that hurt us. Through Jesus Christ Our Lord.**

AMEN

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