The Sixth Sunday after Trinity

Wrath and Giving

Holy Trinity Utrecht, 9am and 10:30am 11 July 2021 AD

Romans 6:3-11 Matthew 5:20-26

*You have heard that it was said by them of old time, You shall not kill.*

[Matthew 5:21-22]

Today we look at the natural *fight* response to a perceived threat. We can have lots of spiritedness, release of energy, in the soul when we are angry. Anger is exhilarating. It makes us get up off our couch spurring us to action to overcome an injustice – we feel alive! Our life has meaning in that moment – to fight the injustice. Who doesn’t enjoy watching a movie where the small person, a David, stands up to fight a Goliath, a big corporation who has been squashing people – putting profit over human health – overcome through legal channels? Anger, channeled wisely and justly to right a great wrong. Finally!

If anyone has told you that anger is bad – they haven’t read the Bible – anger is of God!

Think of the oppression and enslavement of Israel by Egypt – God sends his wrath – the 10 plagues!

Or the oppression of the people of God when they return to their land by the Philistines – God sends his wrath! Gideon leading a small band to overcome the Midianites!

Or when Israel who received of the gift of the Law, ignored it or were contemptuous of it – God sends his wrath! His people were always warned first – but when they did not stop – God sent his wrath! Exile by the Assyrians, exile by the Babylonians – these were necessary last resort actions of God’s wrath to wake the people up!

God’s anger is a manifestation of His love.

And being made in God’s image *we* can have anger as a gift to react quickly and decisively to react to an injustice.

Our Lord Jesus who is fully human shows us this. He was angry

* with the Scribes and Pharisees – he explained clearly to these teachers why – they were the blind leading the blind, pretending to be something they weren’t;
* he was angry with their hardness of heart when they would fault him for healing a sick man on the Sabbath – he revealed their hypocrisy using reason and healed the man in front of them;
* he was angry with the desecration of the Temple in Jerusalem – he explained clearly what was the injustice, *My house shall be a house of prayer but you have made it a den of thieves*! – and made a whip of cords and drove the money-changers from the Temple.

The Apostles likewise expressed their anger at the false teachers who undermined the faith of the flock.  Paul was angry with Peter and the Judaizers for confusing the Gospel. [Gal 2] Paul and Peter and James and Jude were angry with immorality in the churches. [innumerable places] John was angry with the Gnostics, who denied that Jesus came in the flesh. [e.g. 2 John] But their response, like Jesus, was measured, reasoned, they sought by word to speak clearly the truth into the situation to reveal and stop the injustice.

*Be angry,* says Paul*, but do not sin: let not the sun go down on your wrath* [Eph 4:26].

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But anger, in us, can so easily spin out of control. And anger, in us, can be *without a cause*.

Jesus warns us today about the dangers of unrighteous anger in us.

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgement.’ But I say to you, That whoever is angry with his brother *without a cause* shall be in danger of the judgement: and whoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, You fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.  [Matthew 5:22]

St Augustine describes this as three degrees of unrighteous anger manifesting itself – the first is when we hold the anger inwardly, the second when we hold the anger and utter some indistinct sound to express our disdain or contempt – *Raca!*, the third level, when we hold the anger and express outwardly some censure of the person – *You fool!*  These are signs of anger hidden in our hearts and progressively expressed outwardly. We are warned in the strongest of terms by Jesus to deal with this quickly or we will be *in danger of hell fire!* Meaning, consumed by our anger so that we cannot act with reason, but only destructively, full of hatred – hell fire!

Not just outward murder, but Jesus says the holding of anger towards another person can become a committing of murder. Our intention in holding it and in expressing it, is to take away from the spiritedness, the liveliness of others, we want to diminish their life. I’ve given these examples before:

* Think of an abused child always cowering, walking on eggshells waiting for the next outburst of anger – a tragic diminishment of life. Instead, we are meant to take our place in this world, to stand with confidence not to be cowering in fear.
* And in a less extreme case, have you ever been in a room with others with someone who is angry at you – how it takes away from the joy of the gathering? The cool stare, hatred unexpressed verbally, but you cannot function as you would.
* And we know all too well how when we hold unresolved anger towards one person, it can spill out in our dealings with others who had nothing to do with the offence. I’m angry because of something that happened at school or at the office and I become in a bad mood towards my loved ones at home who are innocent.

When we are angry, we can easily move to a place where we cannot reason as clearly. Our response to a perceived injustice can so easily be over the top.

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**So how do we attend to this *anger without a cause*** quickly when it arises in our hearts? Jesus says,

Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has anything against you, leave there your gift before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

When we are angry with someone *without a cause* – the source of our anger lies somewhere deeper and even unrelated to the person we are angry with. Jesus tells us to look at ourselves – like he did a few weeks ago, when he said first take the log out of your own eye, before you try to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye.

He says – think about the times you have offended another person – it doesn’t take long for someone to come to mind – it destabilizes us from our feelings of self-righteousness that can be making us angry *without a cause* with others. And when we go through this exercise of asking forgiveness of others, we may also see more clearly how easy it is for others to be angry at us without a cause. We see the need for all of us to live in a state of mercy – asking mercy from God and from others and freely offering mercy to them.

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**So what if I am angry *with a cause*?**  Step back and reflect carefully on why you are angry – you might need to ask Jesus to show you why you are angry, because anger darkens our minds, we can’t think as clearly. When you can see why, then seek to resolve the injustice by speaking in clear reasoned words what has made you so angry. If you have not been heard, then at least you have done what you can to clear the air. In cases of serious injustice, you might need to seek justice in the courts. Courts are the place to resolve in a *dispassionate* way an injustice (a third party, lawyers and judges, can often see things more clearly), and the legal system can help prevent further injustices and in bringing about penitence in the offender. That child who walked around on egg shells cowering in fear has a right to be really angry when he grows up – but not towards his loved ones around him today – Christ would have him get help for his anger and channel that energy in the path of love.

In the end, we must realize that we will not always get satisfaction for the wrongs done against us in the past. So ultimately, if we are not satisfied that we have received justice, we can bear with it by forgiveness, as we come to know God’s forgiveness of us. We can ask God to fill our hearts with a love that moves us beyond our ever-shrinking world (that can become darker and smaller only focusing on the injustice) once again to a love of God and our neighbour.

Life is too short for that bitterness of soul that makes us unpleasant to be around, and that in the end will utterly destroy us and hurt those around us.  Should our whole lives and our relations with others be defined by some injustice committed against us in the past? The Kingdom of Heaven is not found there.

Instead of holding on to inner rage, we put before our minds the tragic end of wrath – even the hurting of the innocent around us – think of Cain who murdered his innocent brother Abel, or the Scribes and Pharisees who stirred up the crowds to cry out against the sinless man Jesus, *Crucify him! Crucify him!... Why? What evil has he done?*

Instead of holding on to an inner rage, Paul reminds us to put before our minds that blessed flood which flows as a never-ending stream from our Saviour’s side as he hung upon the Cross.  We recall those waters of baptism in which that *old man*, that fallen way of reacting to every injustice done to us, has died and by which our souls were restored and new life can begin once again to flourish in us. *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*

As we proceed on our pilgrimage to the kingdom of heaven, we will need a fighting spirit. But that spirit must be purified of unrighteous anger. We must bring that *fight* response under the command of a God-inspired reason. We will need this spiritedness to fight against temptation in our midst when we cannot flee from it. Paul says we are to fight against principalities and powers of wickedness, ideas, ideologies, that we see manifesting themselves as injustices in societies and in the Church. *Put on the whole armour of God!* [1 Cor 6:3; Eph 6:12] We will fight for what is right and for what is true, for justice mingled with mercy.

God has such great things in store for us if *all* our spiritedness, including our anger, is placed in the service not of hatred but of love.

Amen +