

“BEFORE THE SUN GOES DOWN,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, May 8, 2022

Over the past weeks many of us have been haunted by what happened in Grand Rapids on the far side of our state. A police officer stopping a car with questionable plates ended up in a physical altercation that resulted in the shooting and death of the young driver. Much of the incident was captured on phone camera footage. An investigation is still underway. Before all the evidence is in and carefully weighed it's hazardous to make any definitive judgment. But it looks like the officer's reaction to whatever infraction was at hand was all out of due proportion.

Moment by moment, the incident, as captured by video, escalated, ending in what can only be regarded as a tragedy from every point of view. The young, twenty-six-year-old driver, Patrick Lyoya, lost his life. A police officer, Christopher Schurr, is facing a potential criminal investigation. Yet ahead may lie criminal charges. In another sense, the officer may have lost his life too. Meanwhile, two mothers are surely grieving—Patrick Lyoya's mother and the mother of the police officer. Their dads as well.

How did it come to this? Why couldn't the officer deescalate the situation when it started getting out of hand? What was in his heart? What was in his mind? In those moments of altercation was something spilling over from the officer's own past?

God has made us all wondrously. But we are each complicated creatures who sometimes end up carrying around emotional baggage that is other than godly. Sometimes packed away is residual resentment and anger from other frustration points in our lives. It can be buried so deeply and sometimes for so long that we don't even recognize it in ourselves. And then it just impulsively spills out or even explodes when we don't expect or anticipate it. Such an abiding inner anger, above and beyond simply being upset and mad in the moment, can surface either as a snarky meanness or as outright hatred, cruelty, and violence. No human being is immune to such a possibility which is exactly why the prophets and apostles and our own Savior Jesus Christ expressly warned and cautioned us about it.

Anger is a simple five letter word. But it can be a two-edged sword. On the one hand, an honest anger can be healthy, even cathartic. When truly righteous, it may even be admirable—as Israel's bravest prophets and Jesus Christ at moments show us. It's often better to get angry and honestly express such feeling rather than bury it and get depressed or stew in it.

On the other hand, anger, if not focused, channeled, or restrained by reason and thoughtfulness, can end up becoming incredibly destructive. Detroiters like us know all about that. The outpouring of anger that was the Detroit Riot or Rebellion of 1967 destroyed a great city which up until that point was regarded as one of the most progressive in America. Although we continue to live in hope and see the promise, Detroit more than a half-century

later still has not fully recovered. More recently, two summers back, something similar happened to a whole district in the City of Seattle with buildings torched and destroyed. And in Washington, D.C., the United States Capitol was looted and trashed. Now, overseas, intense frustration and anger on Vladimir Putin's part are, as the news reports, leveling entire cities in Ukraine. Photographs of the devastation from Detroit, Seattle, Washington, D.C., and a more distant Mariupol could be fairly captioned, *This is What Anger Did*.

Unfortunately, when it comes to anger, we don't seem to learn the lessons of history well. Here in the United States, anger and violence are enshrined and glorified more than ever by our popular culture and media. I always found President Ronald Reagan to be the most affable and genial of guys. He certainly projected that. However, I'll never forget his famous quip, borrowed from a Clint Eastwood *Dirty Harry* movie, "Make my day!" Essentially, the president's smiling message, whether he exactly meant it or not, was, *You cross me... I'll blow you away!* That's since become a pervasive attitude with people acting on anger at every turn. We see it in mass shootings bringing terror to malls, concerts, churches, and schoolyards. We observe it in the spike of gun violence in streets across America during the COVID pandemic. And as the tragic incident in Grand Rapids underscores, it surfaces in the way that police walk or drive their beat. But unrestrained anger also rears its ugly head in lesser but still serious acts of meanness, which contribute to an environment inhospitable to human flourishing and well-being, violating the spirit of Jesus' own teachings. It's all far from the courtesy, civility, and respect for others that our mothers taught us.

To be sure, Jesus, who had in Mary a very thoughtful and caring mother, faced his own moments of frustration, pique, and anger. Remember the episode at the Great Jerusalem Temple where Jesus overturned the tables of the money traders and pigeon sellers in outrage over their avariciousness and greed which was turning his father's house into a "den of thieves"? (*Mark 11:15-17*) Likewise, in our gospel lesson for this morning we see a very hungry and no doubt stressed Jesus irrationally cursing a fig tree that has no fruit to offer because it's out of season. (*Mark 11:12-14*) Nevertheless, as capable of anger as he humanly was, Jesus was very clear and emphatic about the hazards and dangers of anger—and the need to keep it in check.

Indeed, in our same morning gospel lesson Jesus uses the sight of the barren fig tree, which has shriveled up in the aftermath of his curse, to warn his apostles and the rest of us against thoughts and deeds precipitated by anger. Specifically, don't be rash in cursing and condemning others. Be careful even in what you pray for. Don't abuse the power of prayer. To his astonished apostles, Jesus explains: "When you pray and ask for something, believe that you have received it, and you will be given whatever you ask for. And when you stand and pray, forgive anything you may have against anyone, so that your Father in heaven will forgive the wrong things you have done." (*Mark 11:24-28*)

With divine insight, Jesus grasped that our anger towards others can come back to haunt us through unexpected and unintended consequences—perhaps like the Grand Rapids police officer.

Of course, the finest and highest expression of Jesus' warning against anger is to be found in his Sermon in the Mount. There Jesus proclaims: "You have heard that people were told in the past, 'Do not commit murder; anyone who does will be brought to trial.' But now I tell you if you are angry with your brother you will be brought to trial; if you call your brother 'You good-for-nothing!' you will be brought before the Council and if you call your brother a worthless fool you will be in danger of going to the fire of hell." (*Matthew 5:21-22*) If this message about the perils of anger isn't clear enough, Jesus goes on to add: "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But now I tell you: do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap you on the left cheek too. And if someone takes you to court to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well... You have heard it was said, 'Love your friends, hate your enemies.' But I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become children of your Father in heaven." (*Matthew 5:38-40, 43-45*)

Finally, Jesus declares: "So if you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God." (*Matthew 5:23-24*)

Jesus' message is pretty emphatic. What we call *trash talk* today, which has become so commonplace, is an exercise in anger that we should avoid. Mean and unloving, it's evil in its own right, even if we don't otherwise impulsively act on it through deeds that go beyond mere words alone. But Jesus condemns physical violence too which, even if we feel it is justified, spiritually pollutes us. Better and spiritually safer always is—in the wise words of Old Testament Proverbs—"to seek peace and pursue it." (*Proverbs 34:14*) God always honors such peace-minded initiative on our part most and best. It's the kind of advice that faithful mothers know to give as well.

Jesus upheld his own advice and counsel to us, even in a crunch. At Calvary, showing a supreme spiritual integrity, he looked down from the cross at those who had persecuted and brutalized him and said for all generations to hear: "Father, forgive them for they know what they do." (*Luke 33:34*) Jesus' mother Mary was right there in sight of the cross and surely heard this, then or later. Amid all the sorrow Mary felt, it must have been a proud and joyful moment for her. Her son had learned well from God--and her.

In all of his teaching on the topic of anger, Jesus was not saying that we should passively accept rank injustice or allow people to get away with murder and mayhem. Standing up for Jesus and with Jesus means standing up for what is morally right and fair. Yet it also means

exercising emotional self-control and stay morally principled, avoiding pettiness and any resort to intimidation, whether we are making laws or protesting them. Even a good end or purpose never justifies a bad means of getting there.

Rather than getting fixated on our own anger over real or imagined wrongs perpetrated against us, our openness to others, a genuine willingness to talk and listen to another in the face of disagreement, and a readiness to compromise for the sake of a greater good that serves God purposes are the hallmarks of Jesus' way. They should be the hallmarks of our way too as Christ's professed disciples.

The Apostle Paul grasped the import of Jesus' message on anger when he called to a new life in Christ. As he put it in his Letter to the Ephesians: "If you become angry, do not let your anger lead you into sin, and do not stay angry all day [letting the sun descend on it]. Don't give the devil a change... Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear you... And do not make God's Holy Spirit sad... Get rid of hateful feelings of any sort. Instead, be kind and tender-hearted to one another, as God has forgiven you through Jesus Christ." (*Ephesians 4:26-32*)

Could any declaration ring more true? It's the kind of advice that mothers used to give their children—and hopefully still do. It's good Christian advice, faithful to Jesus. As Christians, then, we need to be vigilant when it comes to anger. Anger, per se, is not evil. But what we do with it, particularly when we harbor it or let it fester, most certainly can be. Accordingly, as we go about our daily lives, especially in times like our own, we need to be more alert than ever to the danger of anger in ourselves and others.

It's important to be honest and forthright about any anger that we are harboring. In owning up to it, we also need to examine what's continuing to feed it. Finally, we need to get to work, channeling angry energies constructively so that they don't eat us alive or don't pop out of us hurtfully, destructively, or even lethally towards others.

Our capacity as men and women of faith to entrust more to God's judgment and grace, rather than trying to right every real or imagined wrong ourselves, can certainly help.

The example and living spirit of Christ embraced can truly empower us to convert any testiness and anger into something more peaceful, redemptive, and beautiful.

Let me close this morning with further wise words from the Old Testament Book of Proverbs, only slightly paraphrased: *She who is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he who rules his own spirit and maintains self-control is greater than one who take an entire city. (Proverbs 16:32)* May all the wisdom of the Biblical Proverbs, the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the compassion and kindness that our own mothers have encouraged in us be our continuing guide so that we do not let the sun set on our own anger. **Amen.**