

Mike Bennett
First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
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Ephesians 4.25-5.2
John 6.35,41-51

Room For The Devil

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,
and do not make room for the devil.

—Ephesians 4.26-27

The letter to the Ephesians, attributed to the Apostle Paul, invites us into careful reflection on many important themes of the Christian life. Ephesians refuses to give simple answers to complex questions. Its chapters invite us to take a careful and balanced view of what God requires of individual Christians and of the Christian community.

In today's passage, Paul takes up the topic of anger. As usual, the letter offers a rich and nuanced exploration of a topic that we might otherwise try to dismiss with a simplistic command. Does anger have a place in the life of faith? Our first instinct, I think, is to answer, "No, it does not." Over the years that I've been a pastor, I've noticed that people are usually quite reluctant to *display* anger at church. We have an image of Christians as "nice guy" types who don't ever lose their tempers. We'd like things to be smooth and calm around church.

But, of course, genuine human interaction is seldom smooth and calm. So, to banish anger from the church is really to banish genuine human interaction. Paul will have none of that. "Be angry," he says, in a phrase that one wouldn't expect to find in the Bible. Be angry. With those two words, the letter skillfully disposes of our sentimental desire for the appearance of peace at any cost. Be angry—but, of course, he goes on to further qualify this command:

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Be angry, but do not sin—that's the trick! Paul doesn't let us off the hook with either of the easy available options. He doesn't say, "Don't be angry, it isn't nice." But neither does he say,

“Go ahead and be angry, it’s good for you.” He urges us to a difficult balance: “Be angry, but do not sin.”

He also mentions that failure to deal properly with anger will “make room for the devil.” I guess I’m a bit agnostic on the subject of the devil, but I certainly believe in the reality of evil. Paul seems to suggest that evil—or the devil—thrives best when we help it along. Perhaps we can revisit that suggestion later, but first we need to look at some guidelines for anger presented in today’s text.

Anger—Up Front

The first guideline for anger that emerges from this text is the simple rule that we must *acknowledge* our anger. I mentioned earlier that in my years of ministry, I’ve noticed that people don’t much like to *display* anger at church. I selected the word “display” advisedly. I didn’t say that people didn’t get angry at church. Of course they do! The problem is that the church hasn’t generally provided a good set of practices for expressing and dealing with anger.

The two most common church responses to anger are symbolized by the parking lot and the back door. (We don’t have a parking lot, of course, but most churches do.) People who get angry at church sometimes share their anger with the wrong people. That’s the route of the parking lot. You’re mad at something the preacher said, so you wait until you can find a favorable audience—out in the parking lot after church, or maybe at the Big Y—to air your grievances. You often see this at church meetings. After a good church meeting, people may linger outside to enjoy each other’s company. But if they linger after a bad church meeting, it is a sure sign that anger that *should* have been voiced at the meeting was saved to be voiced—more destructively—in the parking lot.

The route of the back door is also used. Instead of speaking our anger, we just slip quietly out the back door. Sociologists call this “substituting exit for voice.”¹

Being able to express our anger—to the right people—is the first step to getting beyond it. It is hard work, but this sort of honesty is absolutely necessary to prevent a small spark of anger from smoldering into a large flame of hatred. According to Ephesians, we *must* be up front about our anger as a sign of our commitment to living truthful lives. We *can* be up front

about our anger because we are connected to each other by the powerful bonds of Christian fellowship:

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. –Ephesians 4.25

Anger—Face To Face

We must speak the truth, Paul tells us. Another small word in that verse gives us a clue to a second guideline for a Christian approach to anger: “Let all of us speak the truth *to our neighbors.*” Anger is best expressed in face to face encounters with people who are in close physical proximity. It is much easier to keep fueling anger toward an abstraction or a faceless name than it is to sustain hatred for someone you know, someone who is a neighbor.

In some of the angry struggles of my life, I’ve learned that this is true. An angry letter or e-mail often makes me feel great—for a minute—but does little to help resolve the situation. An angry phone call works a little better, but still offers very little hope for genuine reconciliation. But anger honestly expressed, in a face-to-face meeting, really can help a dialogue continue. It doesn’t work every time, but it is much more likely to succeed.

The most depersonalized form of anger is when we frame our anger at an abstraction: “The System,” “Bureaucrats,” “Homosexuals,” “Foreigners,” “Teachers,” “Politicians.” It is this sort of smoldering rage that helps anger, or “wrath,” take its place among the seven deadly sins. Author Henry Fairlie puts it well:

...few things are more characteristic of our age and few things are more idly tolerated, than the way in which Anger is turned so often on abstractions, which are then personified in actual people, who may therefore be justly persecuted at one’s own willing.²

The simple practice of speaking in close physical proximity dramatically reduces the size of the operating theater for evil. Or, as Paul might put it, speaking face-to-face leaves less room for the devil.

Anger—Seeking Reconciliation

The letter to the Ephesians has suggested that we learn to express our anger openly and, whenever possible, in face-to-face neighborly proximity. At least one more guideline can be extracted from our text. Anger must be expressed with an aim toward reconciliation. This doesn't mean that reconciliation will come easily, or that it will always be possible at all. What it means is that our *purpose* in speaking our anger must be to build up and restore relationships, not just to fire off shots at some tantalizing target. This, I think, is the essence of the Ephesians' teaching on anger. "Be angry, but do not sin." It is also the rationale for the narrow time frame for dealing with anger. Paul's letter adopts a common proverb of his day in order to get this point across: "Do not let the sun go down on your anger."

Anger, pure and simple, isn't a sin. But anger seldom remains pure and simple. It quickly turns into the desire to hurt, into the lust for revenge. Thus transformed, simple anger becomes dangerous wrath—a sin. One of the seven deadly sins. A truly Christian expression of anger will always have an eye forward to reconciliation. The foundation for this desire for reconciliation comes from God's own example:

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, *as God in Christ has forgiven you.*

—Ephesians 4.31-32

The letter to the Ephesians doesn't give us easy answers about anger. It does give us some clear guidelines: be up front about your anger, express your anger face-to-face, and always seek reconciliation. These are good guidelines, but they are not easy to follow. I know that I often fail to live by them.

But being part of a Christian community gives us wonderful tools in this never-ending struggle. The church can be, in the best sense, a school for anger. As a church, we have a place

to go where the truth is sought and valued. We have face-to-face dealings with real people. And we are constantly reminded by scripture and worship of the possibility of fellowship and reconciliation.

And, yet, evil still has lots of opportunity. Try as we may, we leave plenty of room for the devil. Perhaps the struggle against anger is more cosmic than a few ethical guidelines. Call it the devil or call it the power of evil, it isn't going to give in without a battle. That battle rages on, but—thankfully—the war has already been won, as the last verse of our passage reminds us:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

--Ephesians 5.1-2

¹ See Albert O. Hirshman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*.

² Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), page 105.