

## Be Angry but Do Not Sin

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 14, Year B, Track 2, RCL. Ephesians 4:25 –5:2. August 12, 2018. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

We are taking a break in today's sermon from the sequence of readings from the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John. These readings present extended Eucharistic imagery of Jesus as the Savior of the world, and while the Eucharist (along with the Trinity, the grounding of all existence in God, the self-emptying of Christ, and a few other theological notions), is one of my favorite preaching topics, it's time to look at Ephesians, which has been running in its own sequence for weeks now without much comment from me.

Today's extract from Ephesians contains the famous admonition, "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 4:26-27a). Turns out "be angry but do not sin" is from the fourth verse of Psalm 4; the translation in our Book of Common Prayer reads "Tremble, then, and do not sin; speak to your heart in silence upon your bed." Which is a pretty typical translation of that verse into English; but it's different in Ephesians – that bit about being angry – because Paul (or whoever wrote Ephesians; I'm among those who accept Paul as its author, rather than someone writing in Paul's name) – Paul, as I say, was quoting the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, known and used by Greek-speaking Jews and, of course, by the Christians of Greek cultural background who were Paul's missionary specialty. And the Septuagint seems to assume trembling with anger rather than (as our usual

translation suggests) trembling with fear of God. Putting the whole Biblical witness together, I would freely translate the passage something like this: “You are certainly going to get angry from time to time; when you do, do not nurse your anger or spread it around: take it to God in prayer.”

Human emotions are not evil in themselves. They are part of the raw material for the moral life. Anger is imputed (not unreasonably) even to God. The question is: what comes of it? I once saw a person speak very angrily to a group of people who were behaving very badly, and knew they were; I knew him as a person of keen, helpful insight and brilliant humor. But he knew the right use of healthfully expressed anger; the people apologized and quit doing what they were doing – at least for the moment; they were a group of hard-core drug addicts who were smoking in an elevator of the building where one of their treatment programs met, and I suspect that was not the first, or the last, time they stepped over that line. But part of the deal that allowed them to use those facilities was that they were expected to behave like adults who cared about more than their own compulsions. My friend’s anger, and the stern tone that expressed it, were entirely appropriate. When that exchange was over, it was over. It was a clean and crisp as such encounters ever get.

I’ve also known, and known of, people who’ve spent a long time – years, even – angry at God. The ones I’ve known best did not take that out on other people, or on anything else; it was an ongoing conversation with God. It took as long as it took. God can take it; the moral problem arises if you let your anger and frustration distort your own heart or your relationship with

God and God's creation. (That would be, in the language of Ephesians, making room for the devil.) A forthright, truthful contention with God will not last forever, and the troubled – but honest and upright – soul will find healing, if not in this life, in the next. Because, of course, not all contentions with God turn out in this life as well as Job's, whose fortunes are restored at the end of the book of the Bible that bears his name.

Job had a fierce and vigilant humility that is the mark of someone who knows that God is not to be given up on. Another faithful sufferer was Mother Theresa, who languished for many years without any sense of the reassuring presence of God in her devotions. (This is called "the dark night of the soul" and it is a normal feature of a serious prayer life, though typically it doesn't go on for as long as it did in her case.) But she never stopped praying, never gave up on her calling in God to serve the poorest of the poor. She had Job's fierce and vigilant humility, and she knew, on top of that, a Savior who had his heart broken for the life of the world.

This is what it can mean to "be imitators of God, as beloved children, [living] in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Our reading from Ephesians ends with those words, which (for reasons you may be guessing) are the words with which I prefer to announce the Offertory, the beginning of the Eucharist, right after the announcements. I wish we kept the word *fragrant* in that offertory sentence, because Christ *was* a "fragrant offering" – despite the wretched suffering of betrayal, torture and execution. Jesus let his heart be broken for the anger and fear of the world. Anger and fear most always go together. But

anger that breaks the heart in love, that leads to – or through – steadfast faithfulness, sweeps out the fear of loss and pain, the fear of death itself, and becomes the fear of the Lord: the awe, the trembling perhaps, of a human heart and mind in touch with what the majesty of God demands of us – and the lengths of patience and compassion this same God is capable of.

If we are called to imitate *that*, brothers and sisters (and we are), let us pray for and with one another indeed, never letting the sun go down on whatever would stand between us and God's steadfast love.

❖ This sermon is a revision of the one preached at the Shared Ministry on August 9, 2015.