

APOSTOLIC ANGER MANAGEMENT

Sermon, June 2, 2019

Texts: Psalm 4, Acts 16:16-34 (Ephesians 4:26-27)

Don't close your hymnals yet! Please take a look at the bottom of the page (*hymn #499, Rock of Ages*) and note the name of the author and the name of the tune ... I'll be mentioning those in a few moments.

Psalm 4, verse 4 says, "*In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.*" As the Psalmist seems to assume, anger does have a proper place. In and of itself, anger is not inherently wrong. Frankly, I worry about someone who does not (or *can* not) get angry; as someone once put it, "*The person who cannot be angry at evil usually lacks enthusiasm for the good.*" Anger can be a powerful impetus for good, and if we love what is good, then evil things will and should anger us! However, anger can work its way out in all kinds of destructive ways. Aristotle wrote: "*Anyone can become angry. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way ... this is not easy.*"

Some other select quotes on anger, some of which I've shared before from this pulpit: "*Anger is just one letter short of danger.*" Another: "*The emptier the pot, the quicker the boil.*" Thomas Jefferson: "*When angry, count to ten before you speak, if very angry, a hundred!*" Mark Twain later wrote, as if in rebuttal: "*When angry, count to four, when very angry, swear!*" (I'm just quoting; endorsement is not to be implied). And perhaps my favorite from that great theologian -- Ann Landers: "*Anger is an acid which destroys its container from within.*"

The hymn we just sang was the result of anger managed appropriately. "Rock of Ages" always provokes nostalgic memories for me of the Methodist church in which I was raised. My parents were among the charter members of this church planted by the Rev. Norman Hunter. The Clarks were somewhat like the Majiekas with their five children here in the front each Sunday, all six Clark kids were in worship weekly, and when my mother joined the choir (*in which she still sings 55 years later!*), we were all pew-managed by my Dad throughout our school years whenever the choir sang ... no Children's Church in those early days of Willistown Methodist. "Rock of Ages" was one of Rev. Hunter's favorites (*or maybe is was one of Mrs. Dunlap's favorites; she was the organist*); I think we sang it at least once a month ... which is sweetly ironic because the lyrics were originally written as an angry critique of Methodist theology!

In 1776, 36 year old Anglican clergyman Augustus Toplady published an scathing and lengthy rebuttal of the theology of John and Charles Wesley; it was published in "*The Gospel Magazine*" in England (*a magazine still published to this day*). There were strong differences between the Calvinist and Wesleyan "camps" in the Anglican Church of that day, especially in the areas of free will and human ability to be holy, and sometimes the debates could become quite heated and intense ... which, by the way, is not necessarily a bad thing! It's OK to argue, it's OK to have debate, it's good to have convictions that are firm and substantial and dearly held ... but to re-quote Aristotle, "*... to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way ... this is not easy.*" When iron sharpens iron, sparks can and do fly, but one most beneficial result is that the process makes everyone sharper and far less dull! Not to digress, but for the most part I think we've lost the ability to have coherent and civil moral and theological conversations in our current hyper politicized climate today, and that's sad. It is good to sharpen our focus and our beliefs, and articulate, civil debating of our convictions can have a refreshingly clarifying effect on all that we hold dear.

Augustus Toplady concluded his detailed and forceful rebuttal with a poem that summed up his contentions and main points, somewhat sarcastically using Wesleyan language and theological jargon and turning it on it's theological head (*which would take another sermon to explain in detail*), and that poem became the lyrics of our previous hymn, set to music in 1830 to the tune now called "Toplady" in your hymnals. I find it wonderfully ironic I first learned this hymn growing up in a *Methodist* church; this grand hymn has been enjoyed by Wesleyans and Calvinists alike for nearly two centuries, who, in the process of managing their anger productively, eventually found many points of agreement and mutual understanding in faith and worship.

"*In your anger, do not sin.*" Yes, there will be occasions for anger ... but, as the Psalmist implores, don't let your anger lead you into sin. "*When you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.*" In and of itself, anger is not inherently wrong. It's interesting the Psalmist assumes that one place where anger festers is as we lie there in

¹ Adapted from *Hymns of Faith and Inspiration*, P. Kennedy, Ideals Publishing, Nashville, TN, pp. 48-49, c. 1990

bed, which, by the way, is a common but most unproductive use of time and energy. We can often lie there in our bed just marinating in the vinegar of our anger, can't we? The Psalmist says, "Don't do it!" Rather, either get busy doing something constructive, managing your anger and channeling it to appropriate and constructive, not destructive, ends!

I believe we see two examples of this constructive management of anger in our reading from Acts 16 today (ed. note -- only one of which I was able to cover in the pulpit this Sunday; this became a two part sermon which will now be concluded June 9!). We are told Paul and his companions were on their way to the place of prayer, and we're told a slave girl who was in the grips of an evil spirit began running up behind them in the marketplace shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." The words she spoke were actually quite true, but for obvious reasons it must have been terribly irritating and distracting! As I read this, I wondered how I would feel if on the way home from the office I stopped in at Dave's Market (which is almost a daily occurrence for me; I never mastered the art of competent weekly grocery shopping) and somebody dogged my steps up and down the aisle, shouting, "This man is a servant of the Most High God, who wants to tell you how to be saved!" It would be technically true, but it would get old real fast.

We're also told this troubled young girl just wouldn't stop! Verse 18 says, "She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled ..." Other translations have "... Paul was so annoyed." Paul was "troubled" in the sense that he was irritated, he was annoyed, he was bothered; he was, yes, angry! Paul then and there spun around, faced the girl, and in his anger confronted that evil spirit in her in the name of Jesus Christ and commanded it out of her ... and in so doing *rescued* that girl who was in the clutches of something evil, destructive and demeaning. Personally, I find it reassuring that, essentially, here was this giant of Christian virtue, the great Apostle Paul, and this girl *bugged* him ... more precisely, this girl's *behavior* bugged him. More precisely than that, it was the evil that got him angry. It's OK to get angry; Paul did! He basically cast the spirit of evil out of the girl because he got mad. Which, by the way, is more than a good enough reason to confront evil. After a while you just get tired of putting up with it! There comes a point when patience and tolerance reach their limits. If we care anything at all for what is good and right, then evil *should* anger us, and we need to turn and in the name of Jesus Christ confront it, and try and put a stop to it. Again, "The person who cannot be angry at evil usually lacks enthusiasm for the good." Note, though, Paul was *slow* to anger ... it was only after days of this constant haranguing that he reacted. Make no mistake, though, he was annoyed ... but he constructively managed that anger and used it as an opportunity to heal a tormented soul.

And for what it is worth, let me briefly underscore an important point, which, again, is almost a sermon in itself: By confronting evil, Paul drove the *spirit of evil* away; he did not drive the troubled girl away. His confronting this evil that had gripped this young woman had the effect of saving her, it did not alienate her. It was a loving and compassionate thing to do.

I like the story that appeared in the **Philadelphia Inquirer** April 30, 2007 about a "sting" operation arresting a ring of fortune tellers that were committing credit card fraud (I would include the website link, but I got a virus warning when I tried to re-connect ... so, to be safe, I'll leave it out). The headline: "PHILADELPHIA SHUTS DOWN PSYCHIC BUSINESSES" The subtitle was priceless: "THEY DIDN'T SEE IT COMING." Well, the owners of the freed slave girl didn't see this coming! They are quite upset by this, for they made a fortune from *her* fortunes; their abusive, parasitic use of this poor (now former) fortune-teller had enriched them. By the way, this manipulating and taking advantage of desperate people caught in the clutches of evil is the essence of human trafficking, which is always an abhorrent evil. So these traffickers drag Paul and Silas before the magistrates and said (v. 20) "These men are Jews, and throwing our city into an uproar." These men whipped the crowd into something of an anti-Semitic frenzy against Paul and Silas. To keep the peace, the magistrates had Paul and Silas stripped, beaten, flogged and thrown in prison.

Now, this is all completely unjust. Paul and Silas had done nothing wrong. For freeing a young girl from her torment they were beaten and imprisoned! Nothing about this is right or just or fair ... and next week we'll see just how productively these apostles productively managed their anger in this situation, but for now, we're out of time.

Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, quoting from our Psalter selection this morning, "In your anger do not sin." He continued, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." I have always liked Phyllis Diller's paraphrase of this verse: "Don't go to bed angry ... stay up and fight!" Apostolic Anger Management ... that is a good and productive talent to master in our walk of faith.