

August 12, 2018
11th Sunday after Pentecost (Yr. B)
Sermon series: *Life in Christ*
Part 4: “Making Peace” - Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Episcopal priest John Westerhoff recalls a worship service he attended while visiting several churches on a trip to Latin America. On this particular Sunday morning, worship was to include an infant baptism. The processional began as usual with the crucifer leading the altar party into the church. The priest came next, and behind the priest walked four men carrying an empty, open casket. Next came the other altar ministers, including several servers, each carrying a bucket of water. Lastly came the mother, father, and their infant daughter and her godparents. The processional music was slow and somber, sounding every bit like a funeral dirge.

When it was time for the baptism the servers who had carried the buckets in, poured the water into the open casket, which had been set in place at the front of the church. The priest took the baby in his arms, spoke her name, and immersed the infant completely under the water saying, “I kill you in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”, and then lifting the wet, dripping baby, high up out of the water said, “And I raise you to new life in Christ.” The congregation responded with a hearty “amen”, followed by much clapping, and then burst into singing a joyous Easter hymn. The baby was then dressed in a new white garment and marked with chrism, sealed by the Holy Spirit as now belonging to Christ forever. She was welcomed as the newest member of the body of Christ.

I love this vivid description of baptism! It gives me shivers every time I think about it. Enacting the experience of dying to sin and evil through Christ’s death, and being raised to new life with Christ in his resurrection. This is what the writer of the letter to the Ephesians is reflecting on. The old life of sin and death before conversion to Christ, compared to the new life in Christ which, through the power of the Holy Spirit begins its work in us at our baptism.

Baptism is the launching point for our lifelong conversion to Christ. Think of those before and after pictures we’ve seen when a woman or man has just had a “makeover”. In baptism, our old self is given up, stripped off. We are cleansed and forgiven, and then God dresses us in new and different clothing befitting a new way of life for a person who has been “made over”.

Every time we worship we are called to remember the defining moment of our life as Christians – Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection. “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” “SO THEN”, says this writer- “Don’t do that – but do this instead”. Don’t go back to your old sinful ways. Walk into the way of life God intends and makes possible.

“Put away falsehood / and speak the truth to our neighbors.” “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, / but only what is useful for building up. . . that your words may give grace to all who hear.”

“Put away 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.”

The vibrancy of our life in Christ will be seen through our actions toward each other. Two behavior patterns especially point to the deepening of a Christ-like quality of life in every church. Those two key behavior patterns are our expression of anger, and the ways we speak to and about each other.

ANGER is a sticky wicket for many of us, so it’s worth spending time now to think about and pray into a healthy and spiritually mature way to deal with our feelings of anger. Anger can be a confusing emotion. Sometimes we’re unsure what a good and healthy expression of anger looks like. We can be afraid of our own anger, or the anger of others, whether directed towards us or not. Anger is a feeling, and like all feelings, it is neither positive nor negative. God created us with the capacity to experience a full range of feelings, including anger.

Anger generally takes two forms. One form of anger identified in Scripture is righteous anger. This anger is triggered by injustice of some kind. This is the anger we feel when we see a person being bullied, or the vulnerable ones among us neglected or taken advantage of – the poor, the homeless, the abused, those differently-abled who need advocates to speak up for them, or to stand next to them while they speak for themselves. Righteous anger is Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers in the temple.

The second form of anger includes any other situation not related to injustice. Anger is often triggered by circumstances beyond our control, where our comfort and our agenda are disturbed. Road rage falls into this category, as does the anger we feel when caught in a traffic jam or are stalled by a flight delay. Sometimes anger gets directed at a whole category of people, based on an unpleasant interaction with just one person of that specific group. Sometimes we feel angry towards God about a situation out of our

control. And all of us know the anger we feel when our pride is hurt, we feel insulted or slighted, or someone we love has been insulted.

Whether it is righteous anger, or some other situation that triggers our anger, there are at least three unhealthy responses we can have to the presence of anger.

The first is denial. We can deny that anger is present and instead bottle it up inside. This is a choice. But the thing with bottled up anger is its potential for explosiveness. Sometimes we try to convince ourselves that we shouldn't feel anger towards a particular person. We actually tell ourselves this. Our minds take it very seriously, and we may be able to wall off the anger for some time. But the feelings are still there, gone underground and may get directed or misdirected at someone who is more convenient or safer to dump the anger on. Have you had that experience when someone blows up at you and you wonder, "Well now where did that come from?"

We can also deny anger in a passive way. This can lead to feelings of depression, which some describe as "anger turned inward". Men and women are socialized differently about anger. Our culture generally accepts that it's fine for men to express anger. But women often get the message that it's not okay to express anger, and it's better to keep their focus on caring for relationships with others. Remain passive, in other words.

A second unhealthy response to anger is expressing it in a harmful, destructive way. Our emotional and spiritual growth can be strengthened by studying how anger was expressed in the family in which we were raised. My father is a gentle, humble and faithful man. And I think he believed that a Christian should not get angry ever. His anger tended to get denied, and occasionally came out as feelings of depression. From my mother I learned a different response to anger. My mother would go silent when she felt really angry, and would retreat behind a wall of silence for a day or two. I rarely knew what the source of her anger was, and as a child, would think I had done something to make her go silent. I learned much later in life that my mother was doing her best to avoid the short-tempered and explosive nature of her own father's anger, of which she was afraid. Some families routinely raise their voices, argue, and shout at each other when angry, and can become verbally and physically abusive. Other families model that the way to deal with anger is just to bide our time and get even later with the person who triggered our angry feelings. Needless to say, for many of us there are wounded places in our hearts that beg for the healing touch of Christ when it comes to anger.

The third unhealthy response to anger is to let it linger and nurse it into bitterness and resentment. Psychologist Gary Chapman says that “anger was designed to be a visitor, never a resident in the human heart.” But we do it don’t we, let anger take up residence in us? We stew in the juices of anger and let the anger fester, and it turns into bitterness. We refuse to forgive, and vow we’ll never forget what that other person has done to us.

If this is how we respond to our anger, life becomes a burden. It’s a chore to hold onto and carry around that anger. We’ve known people who become angry at God or the church because of something that happened a year, 5, 15, or 25 years ago. We sin when we give in to the temptation to let anger consume us. This is what the author of this letter means “do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.” Harboring anger and holding a grudge gives God’s adversary a foothold in our life.

The problem with holding on to anger is that it begins to affect our other relationships. It begins to affect our general outlook on life. It is detrimental to our physical and spiritual health. And once bitterness has taken root, it’s a difficult weed to remove from our lives.

Any time we feel angry, it’s worth pausing, taking a breath, and prayerfully asking what the anger might be trying to tell us about ourselves. The Holy Spirit is always there to help, and can help us learn to choose a different way to respond to our anger.

The more faithful alternative in expressing our anger is to choose intentionally to speak the truth in love to one another. To ask daily for the Spirit’s help to be kind, tenderhearted, and willing to forgive one another as God has forgiven us. When we refuse to forgive others we remain hooked to them and the past, and that means the pain continues for us.

Let us never forget that we are a forgiven people, intended to walk in a new way of life, to take on Jesus’ way of seeing and being. We are called to be peacemakers. This requires of us a kind of sacrifice. It means giving up of ourselves. It means giving up our need to be right, our need to feel superior, our need to nurse our anger into a bitter grudge. Giving up ourselves is how we can live and thrive as the body of Christ, loving as Christ loved us. Amen.