

“Letting Go of Anger”
Rev. Dr. Bill Ekhardt

As I was approaching this passage, I was contemplating something that Dr. Bill Panell, who was my homiletics professor - this black professor with this deep, resonate, rich voice [said]. He invited me in a conversation in his office, to read a book by Karl Barth about “The Word of God and the Word of Man.” What he wanted to impart to me was his sense of what preaching is. And, he pointed me, in particular, to a chapter where Karl Barth described that as we come to the pulpit and open Scripture, there is something going both ways. We, as the congregation, come - in Karl Barth’s words – we were asking the question: “Is it true?” and, in response, the Scripture was asking of us, to respond to God - and somewhere in the midst of that we encounter God.

A later professor of mine in my doctoral program suggested, it wasn’t so much that we were necessarily coming and asking, “Is it true?” of this Scripture or, “Can we believe it and have faith in this?” but, “Is it *relevant* – or “Does it matter to my life?” Is it something I should pay attention to? Or, is this something a part of a church and a faith that is an artifact of a bygone time?

As I look at this passage, I see both of those questions and answered resolutely, as it is very relevant to my life. I don’t know if it is relevant to your life – the suggestion from the three people who happened to talk to me [three people asked Bill, as he was coming into worship, if the bulletin cover was for them], was that it was relevant to their lives, as we entered the Sanctuary. I did not know that I had any problems with anger or challenges with anger until later in life. I think I did. but I wasn’t aware of it. I remember I was a 28-year-old associate pastor talking to my senior pastor in Tokyo and he said, “Bill, if you have any question about your sinfulness, your family will make it clear to you,” and he was describing the challenge of living in community with his wife and his children.

I have shared before, here, that I was made painfully aware of the anger in my own life, when I broke my hand in a moment of frustration. I was making breakfast with my 5-, 4-, 3- and 1-year-olds [laughter], and I had an incident of one kind or another with each child, leading up to the fourth one who burst out in tears, because I was making waffles. In that moment, I attempted to destroy the cabinet in front of me [laughter] - and the cabinet won - and I broke my knuckle on my hand.

So, I was painfully aware – painfully; it certainly was painful – that anger was a challenge in my life. Anger is part of the human experience and it is unfortunately something that leaves us broken. It is something that we individually struggle with and something that affects us in our relationships, work places, our communities, our children and parenting. It goes on throughout our lives. So I find this passage, and the call in it, deeply relevant. Also I find it deeply challenging.

The call that the writer of Ephesians describes here is one that sounds close to perfection. Isn’t that why we come to worship every Sunday morning? Weren’t you hoping we would make you perfect today? It is a high calling. It is a challenge that God puts before us.

So what is God calling us to, here? The passage, in general, is a passage describing a beautiful community, and it covers a number of things that I'm not specifically focusing on, like, for those who are stealing; it asks for them to stop stealing and actually work - so that you would have something to contribute.

There is a great deal of emphasis about what we say and about our emotions: Let no evil talk come out of your mouth, but only what is useful for the building up of others, as there is need for words to give grace to those who hear them. Do not grieve for the Holy Spirit, for which you are marked. Put away from you all bitterness, wrath, anger, malice and slander. Wow, that is a difficult one! Is it an impossibly high standard? Is it something we desire in our life? The writer asks us to be moved by what God has done for us. He says, "You who have been freely forgiven, forgive one another. You, who God reached out to, and came, and reached by the person of Jesus Christ, long before turning to God - recognize what God has done for you."

It is easy to forget that, or fail to recognize that. In my own life, I remember this beautiful experience where I entered highway 210. This is in Pasadena, California, so we called it "The 210." I don't know if you know anybody in LA., but every highway has a "the" before it. The 210. I merged onto it, and someone whipped around me and cut me off, and I didn't care.

This was immediately following a retreat experience that I had in a Catholic retreat center, and those who were leading us through it, in part, invited us to spend many hours outside under a tree. And, I remember sitting under this olive tree in a great part contemplating my own brokenness. This is an echo of the desert fathers who would go out in the desert and were left alone, with nobody else around them, and they had to face who they were. In the midst of this, I came out of it feeling this amazing sense of grace: "God, it is amazing to me that you love me and you forgive me, and that you graciously welcome me."

In the midst of that recognition of my own brokenness and what God had shared with me, I no longer cared about the guy who was cutting me off in traffic. Now, it is perhaps impractical that each of us would go for two weeks constantly, to sit under a tree, so it's not a very helpful suggestion on a daily basis, but it is an example of what the writer is describing here: that when we remember how God has forgiven us then it is easier to forgive those around us.

He goes on to call us to some more difficult things. In particular, the passage that I highlighted: "Put away from you all bitterness, wrath and anger, wrangling and slander together with all malice and be kind to one another, kindheartedly forgiving one another in Christ, as Christ has forgiven you." It is just a simple command: Get rid of all anger, bitterness. One of the words there is actually within its semantic ring: contempt. Get rid of all contempt, anger, malice.

Ok. How? It is frustratingly vague right here. It is just this simple command: Let it go. I think this is one place where we might ask the writer of Ephesians to include an appendix: How would you do this? How do we let this go? My expectation is that, within the congregation, the spiritual leaders were sharing traditions about how they had found spiritual practices that allowed them to do this, but they didn't include it here. It's not here

in the text to help us understand how do we do this, other than to remember who God is, and seek to imitate God.

I have found in mentors who have shared with me the traditions of how we let go. They offered two things to me: First, they said, “It might be helpful to pray for the willingness to let go of your anger. If you have someone who you are upset with, you may not initially just be able to come to God and say, “Take this away from me, because you don’t want to.”

I remember talking to a child, who might have been a member of my family [laughter], about his feelings of anger, and he was very clear that he had no interest in letting go of being angry. He liked being angry. Sometimes it takes some work to get to a place where we want to let anger go; let alone our *willingness* to let anger go. So this mentor in my life suggested this: “Pray for this person and specifically pray that this person would have all of the joy, freedom, fulfillment in life that you desire for yourself. Pray for them. Pray every day, to want for them the life you want for yourself and as you lift this before God, it is an opportunity to gain a sense of willingness to want for them, what you want for yourself.”

Then, another mentor described the act of letting go. How do we then come before God and let go of our anger, malice, contempt? He counseled me, first, to contemplate what are the ways this has affected me? What are the ways it impacts our lives? It can be helpful to take a moment to realize how deeply we can be affected by something that has happened to us. Did it affect our self-esteem? Did it affect our sense of security? Did it impact our relationships, and did it cause us to have fear? Contemplating what meaning and residence this had in our life.

Then, this mentor invited me to bring before God a prayer: “God, help me to grant this person the same forgiveness that I would gladly offer to a sick friend.” This specifically is a prayer that this mentor got out of the twelve-steps spiritual practices, so if you have any familiarity with that, that may ring familiar to you. This twelve-step practice for prayer is for letting go of anger: “God help me to forgive this person as I would gladly forgive a sick friend.”

Why would we offer them that grace? Well, for one, the passage asks us to. Two, being angry and holding on to that anger isn’t always that good for us and it certainly isn’t good for the people around us. A friend told me that holding onto anger is like drinking poison, trying to hurt your enemy. We are the one being hurt by it. So, this mentor invited me to pray for the willingness to let go; to pray for this person who I was upset with: “God grant me the willingness; allow me to forgive them as I would easily forgive a sick friend.”

So I offer that to you beyond the Scripture of the spiritual community and what we have found as a means for letting go. How do we let this go?

The picture that the writer creates is one of a beautiful community. It calls us to be imitators of God - beloved children - and live and love as Christ loved us and gave up himself for us, as a fragrant sacrifice and offering.

So, this week as we find ourselves typing that angry e-mail; as we shake our head in stunned belief about something that is said by someone about a political figure - pro or con - and we are rattled in our guts; as we lie in bed and re-feel frustration and anger over a

conversation that happened earlier that day and think through what we would rather have said in that moment; as we recognize this anger in our midst; let us turn to this passage and allow it to invite us to let go - to remember how God has forgiven us freely, graciously, and out of that, thanksgiving. To listen to God's call to let go of our anger. To pray that it would be dismissed. That we might be people who can walk in love, and be imitators of our Lord and Creator.

In response to the word of God proclaimed, we have an opportunity to come to God's table for Communion.

Amen.