Dealing with Anger 2-2-25

(Luke 4:-21-30; 1 Cor 13:1-13) Rev. James Koyama

We are living through a time of change, a contentious time for our country, where relationships can be fragile and easily broken by angry outbursts. And so it seems appropriate that today's Gospel reading helps us to think about how anger is understood in the Bible.

Things go Badly for Jesus

The reading is a continuation of last Sunday's Gospel reading, where Jesus tells his hometown congregation that he has come to bring healing and freedom for captives and sight to the blind. Everything seems to be going well. The hometown crowd notes with pleasure that he is the son of Joseph and therefore one of them. And so, it stands to reason that he will be a good ally, someone who will stand up for them, maybe even skew things in their favor, the way good family members often do for each other. Isn't that what family is about?

But Jesus has not been anointed and given power by God to create advantages for the hometown crowd. He has been anointed to represent the God of <u>all</u> peoples, and so the first "blindness" he has to deal with is the blindness of his hometown crowd. And so he lets them know that he is not going to play favorites. And he does it by

giving them examples of how God sent Elijah and Elisha to bring healing, not to their own ancestors, but to outsiders like the Widow of Zaraphath and Naaman the Syrian.

The way it is written, Jesus sounds very matter of fact, but the hometown crowd takes his words as a slap in the face. “How dare he treat them as though they are of lesser importance to God than those foreigners. And how ungrateful a son he must be, to treat his own relatives as though he owes them so little!

It's hard to say whether Jesus is being too blunt or whether the hometown crowd is too touchy. But things go downhill from there. In fact, the hometown crowd are so angry at what he has said, that they want to throw him off a cliff. On this day, they are not ready or willing to hear about a God who’s love extends to the needy who are beyond the range of what their own hearts will allow.

Jesus: The Model for our Ministry

In this story, Jesus is the model of what a minister should be, and not only a minister, but all of us, as we are all members of the Priesthood of Believers. He is not tempted to represent God as he knows the gathering would like to hear it. Instead, he speaks directly from scripture and does not distort or misrepresent God’s words as they are spoken there.

I wish that I had the perfect vision that Jesus has. I wish I understood the God of the Bible as well as he does. I wish I had his understanding of the hometown crowd, but the reality is that I have never had a hometown. And I wish I had his charisma and his unwavering courage to speak so confidently in the face of disapproval.

Noone who speaks from the pulpit can be more than a flawed alternative to Jesus. What I can say for myself is that I have spent decades reading and studying scripture in search of understanding, because it should be a requirement for any person who preaches regularly. And, in imitation of Jesus, that person should be honest about what it says about God, with as little spin as is humanly possible.

And so, I feel bound by my vows in this moment in our history to speak directly from scripture and say something that has made many people angry in this country today, and that is this. The God of the Bible is more sympathetic to those immigrants and refugees who are fleeing poverty and hopelessness in search of a better future, than he is to us who feel threatened by them but have a secure home in this land.

Completely aside from the question of whether we agree with each other about how our nation should deal with illegal immigration, the God of the Bible commands us, not asks, but commands us, to treat them with the same dignity and respect that we extend to each other.

I am not bending one or two pieces of scripture here to make this point. There are so many passages in scripture about foreigners living among us that say exactly this, that it is impossible to misunderstand God's position on this matter. And so, for me to quietly pass over it at this time in our history would be to muzzle the God of the Bible and misrepresent by omission, what God is saying to us.

In fact, God's positive attitude toward foreigners, is the very issue that, in this morning's Gospel, made Jesus's hometown crowd so angry in the first place. It was his insisting that God's sympathies lay more with the needy foreigner than with them.

At this point, it could be suggested that I am wandering into politics and taking sides and that my views are decidedly partisan. But I have to be clear that I have no desire to be partisan. The last thing I want is for the political arguments that are hamstringing our society to infect and hamstring our life as a congregation.

Understandably, the selection of today's Gospel reading might be thought of as politically motivated, But again, I did not choose it. It was the reading assigned for today by a lectionary which was set in place in 1983. And yes, I had the option of replacing it, but I felt that it would be dishonest of me to muzzle this scripture just because it says something controversial.

Even if what God says in this or in many other passages sound like partisan politics, which it very often will, I am not free to change or ignore what God says. Because the church by definition turns to scripture as its primary source of guidance and it is my responsibility to tell you what scripture says.

We also need to remind ourselves that Christianity is a "Prophetic tradition". In other words, we listen to the words of the prophets, who were like gadflies, who constantly reminded the people about realities they did not want to hear about. And Jesus was part of that tradition, and so he did the same. And you and I are part of that tradition and we too must do the same. In fact, it is one of the saving graces of our faith that we have built into our religion the office of the prophet that compels us to hear voices that are critical of our own behavior. As Jesus said, we must "take the log from our own eye, before we can take the speck from the eye of another."

What I am saying is that, it is my calling in the pulpit, but also the calling of each one of us to play the “gadfly” and say irritating things that no-one want s to hear on God’s behalf when times call for it.

Honesty, Self Control, Kindness

Still, angry confrontation should not be the norm. At the end of Jesus’s bad day in his hometown congregation, he does not return anger for anger, but quietly slips away to continue his ministry.

Which brings us to this morning’s love passage from 1 Corinthians 13, one of the most beloved and well-known passages in scripture. It stands in direct contrast to the angry confrontation we have just described and it reminders us that what we ultimately seek is to live in love and peace rather than conflict.

> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

There is a reason why this passage is the one most chosen for weddings. It reminds us of all the qualities that make it possible to sustain long and fruitful relationships. It reminds us of the patience that counteracts the kinds of knee-jerk angry reactions that occur

when we feel threatened by criticism. Rather than looking for a culprit or assigning blame, love seeks to rejoice in truth. These are qualities that bring us in line with our God who is repeatedly described as being "slow to anger and abiding in steadfast love."

These are contentious times and the the Bible can also be a contentious book. But perhaps if we are patient and loving with each other and with ourselves, and take the anger we experience and listen for God's word in it, God will lead us to out of our own blindnesses and toward the greater light of his love. And I mean that for all of us, no matter where we fall on the political spectrum.