

“Put Away”

Ephesians 4: 25 – 5:2

August 9, 2009

Gunby Presbyterian Church

So then, putting away falsehood let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are all members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those that hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you 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. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

This ends the reading.

Well, I'm glad to be here. I returned last Sunday from an updating of my pastoral skills. It was a week long training; which discussed the details of scheduling, financial resources, administrative tasks, confliction negotiation skills, just the sort of work I needed further training in, but also not my favorite part of ministry. I went with a longing for further knowledge but also with a sense of dread. But this was different. Instead of the usual brief, formal opening prayer that we expect at church meetings, this group opened with five or ten minutes of silent prayer & reflection. Then every two hours, whoever held the clock (a rotated responsibility) would signal the group for five minutes of silent prayer. It was like watching a miracle to see how tension & disagreements would dissolve in that five minutes of silence. The whole discussion would take a different tone, a different slant. Answers to problems seemed to form by themselves. Everyone seemed refreshed rather than wilted at the end. I had never realized that a week of continuing education could be as renewing as a retreat. I came away thinking, we put away a lot of bad feelings. Maybe this is the way Christ intends for the church to relate.

Paul could have said the same thing about his letter to the Ephesians. Written from his jail cell while the known world fell apart, his letter is a treasury of his own teachings, meant to encourage the faithful in a way of life that was in danger of extinction. “Let all of us speak truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another,” he coached them. “Be angry but do not sin.” “Put away from you 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.”

If the Christian Church has lost its moral authority in our time, it is at least partly because we have not taken Paul’s advice. We have our own book of virtues, but we still struggle with its teaching. We do not, on the whole, speak the truth to our neighbors. We are polite but noncommittal, wanting above all to be liked. We do not live as though we are members of one another. We fight with as much malevolence as any bunch of pagans, dividing ourselves into “us” and “them” at the drop of a hat. We are not kind so much as we are nice, which is about as bland a virtue as you can find, if it is a virtue at all. We are called, I think to a higher level of awareness. But how can we be

more aware if we are weighed down with our own wrangling. Put it away Paul says.

About eight months or so ago while I was speaking to the Dover Air-force Base Chaplain he told the story of a professor friend invited to speak at the military base during Christmas break. Arriving at BWI, the guest speaker was met by a young man at the gate who was responsible to escort him through the baggage claim area and onto a waiting vehicle ready to take him to the base. But to the surprise of the guest speaker, his airport escort kept disappearing unexpectedly as they journeyed through the concourse; Once the professor looked up to discover the young man assisting an older woman whose suitcase had broken open, spilling all its contents on the floor. A second time the young man slipped away to lift up two toddlers so they could see Santa Claus seated behind a crowd. A few minutes later he had moved away from his guest one more time to give directions to another traveler who had become disoriented in the terminal. After each diversion, the young man named Jesse returned to walk alongside the professor, resuming their conversation with a smile on his face. Col Groff said his professor friend just couldn't figure out Jesse.

“Where did you learn to do that?” he asked his young companion.

“Do what?” replied Jesse.

“Where did you learn to live like that?” asked the professor, wanting to know how Jesse became so attentive to others, able to see and respond to all these different needs around him.

“Oh,” said Jesse, “I suppose it was during the war,” and for the next hour or so the young man began to explain the lasting impact of his tour of duty as a combat engineer specializing in clearing the mine fields, finding and removing Claymores; sometimes watching his friends blow up before his eyes.

“I guess I just learned to live between steps,” he said, “I never knew whether the next step would be my last, so I just determined to get everything I could out of every moment between the time I picked up my foot and when I put it down again. Every step I took, it was a whole new world, and I guess I’ve just been that way ever since.”

Paul has a similar version of Christian community. Niceness does not concern him. He does not give two hoots about being liked. No one ever taught him that if you cannot say something nice you should not say anything at all. He knows that when real people live in

real community with one another; they will discover real differences and suffer real discord. This is true whether the community is a marriage, a family, a neighborhood, a church, or a whole society. It is not possible to love one another without also hating one another from time to time. When that time comes, Paul says, don't shut up and disappear. Speak the truth in love. Be angry but do not sin. "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

Very few of us were ever taught that anger is part of true love. Even fewer of us have been taught how to handle our anger so that it is part of our health and not part of our sickness. Paul seems to know that being angry and sinning are two different things. The one does not have to lead to the other. It often does, which is why so many of us were taught to hide our anger, but it is entirely possible to be angry with people without sinning – that is, without separating ourselves from them or hurting them in order to spare ourselves the same thing.

At its most basic level, anger is what is called an "emergency emotion." Someone or something threatens you – your safety, your loved ones, your home, your values, your self-esteem – and some very predictable things happen inside of you. Your heart rate and

blood pressure go up. Your pupils dilate. Your breathing gets shallow and your blood flows away from your hands and feet (in case of injury), which gives you sweaty palms. Your body is now physically prepared to fight the threat or flee it, but none of this is a conscious decision on your part. It is a reflex, -- that is your body's ancient way of defending itself against danger. Meanwhile, all your mind knows is that you are M-A-D. Right underneath that madness, of course, is mortal fear, but the mind translates this into anger for purposes of self-defense. This fits well with human nature, which seems to prefer "I'm mad" to "I'm afraid."

So there you have it. A hoodlum jumps into your path. Your bloodstream fills with adrenaline and either you give the guy a karate chop or you run for your life, fueled with energy that seems to have come out of nowhere. This is what we call anger – a strong feeling of displeasure at a perceived threat, accompanied by a rush of energy we can use to flee or fight back. I call it one of God's good gifts – our ability to recognize danger and respond to it – only like so many of God's gifts, it has some real subtleties to it.

In my own lifetime I have seen incredible changes in the world. Yes we do have terrible problems & perplexities. Yes, evil is very

much alive & reaches us in new & insidious ways. As from the beginning of recorded history, there are still wars, devastation & destruction. But are we to wait, expecting the worst, counting on a wrathful God to end everything in a single ruinous blow. Not according to Paul. We are to put away falsehood & speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are all members of one another called to love one other as Christ loves us.

And we can see the changes wrought by Jesus' love is we don't let ourselves be terrorized by the predictors of doom. The United Nations began when my mother was in her hey-day, 1945; helping us understand war is not to be glorified. In my own backwoods Alabama childhood growing up in the 60's; assassinations of our leaders seemed everywhere; lynchings still occurred; domestic abuse was denied & covered up; there was little equality or justice for women in politics, ministry, business, academia, medicine; there were few interracial schools. Some of you might remember the 101st Airborne being called to Central High in Little Rock AK by then President Eisenhower. (By the way the 101st Screaming Eagles were commissioned on by birthday August 15, the year is different however, 1942). When Governor Faubus ordered the Arkansas

National Guard to surround Central High School and prevent nine African-American students from entering, President Eisenhower ordered the 101st Airborne Division into Little Rock to ensure their safety. As Governor Faubus defied the federal court decision on integration, one-thousand troops joined the federalized National Guard units to prevent civil disturbances.

There was little concern over pollution of air, earth & water. The lakes & rivers were almost dead with toxic waste. If anyone fought for whales, seals, or redwood trees, I never heard of them.

At the same time, nations & churches didn't ask one another 's forgiveness, ever. There was little awareness or compassion for political & natural disasters in other lands. There was no feeling of this being one world. So what do we do?

Some people seek help at this point, and the advice they often get is to "let their anger out." If that is as far as they go, they generally become walking volcanoes, spewing unpleasantness on whoever gets in their way. It is a surprising thing, but psychological studies show that venting anger does not diminish angry feelings. It actual increases them, by stimulating that emergency emotion all over again. Anger begets more anger.

So what is the angry person to do? “Be angry but do not sin.” Paul says. Speak the truth. Be kind. Forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. There is another way, which begins with Paul’s distinction between the emotion of anger and the sin of anger. The emotion is nothing more than a flashing red light that say, “Danger here.” Granted, it tends to come with a surge of energy that can make you dizzy, but it is up to us what we will do with that surge. The crucial thing, for me, is to take responsibility for my anger. It is mine, and it is subject to my interpretation. The more curious I can become about it, the better.

Why am I feeling threatened? Is the threat real? Is it intentional? What is my own part in what is going on? Have I got my facts straight? If Paul is right that we are members of one another, then my enemy is a part of me. What part, I wonder? Is there something I hate in him because it is easier than hating it in myself? Most important of all, where is God in all this? What is my anger trying to reach me?

Most of our mothers taught us to count to ten when we were mad so that we could think about these things. If we would still count to ten – or ten hundred, maybe – chances are that we might have

something decent to say when we opened our mouths again. We might be able to say how we feel and what we want from our neighbors without expecting them to change on the spot because we said so. We might learn to express ourselves so that we can be heard – without blame or bitterness – and to listen as carefully as we wish to be listened to ourselves. We might even figure out how to be imitators of God.

Christians of all people, should know that there is such a thing as a good fight. Read the Bible! God fought with those God loved the most: Abraham, Moses, David, Job. Jacob wrestled the angel. Jonah got sent to his room inside a great fish. Jesus yelled at his disciples as if they were a bunch of truant schoolboys. He called the Pharisees every name he could think of in order to get their attention, but from day one, divine anger has been anger that means to heal and not to harm, to unite and not to divide. That is what makes a fight a good one, and every one of us can learn how.

Contrary to popular opinion, Christians are not nice, polite people, who never get angry with one another. Those are not our virtues. Our virtues are truth-telling, kindness, forgiveness, and yes, even anger – as long as it is the anger that is part of true love –

through which we move closer to one another and to the God who has show us how it is done.

There is change in spite of our many problems. We are beginning to listen to one another. We are admitting need for changes. In an almost unbelievable way concern & compassion for the suffering has deepened. Christ is at work, among us, just as he promised; for we are all members of one another. In our lifetimes there has been a Gandhi, a MLK, Jr., a Mother Theresa, a Desmond Tutu, who tells this story: after he received the Nobel Peace Prize recognizing his leadership in the South African struggle against the political racism of apartheid, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu was asked to recall the most formative memory of his life. He told the interviewer there was one particular moment that had a profound impact on the development of his faith & eventually his role as a leader for his country. He said, "One incident comes to mind immediately. When I was a young child I saw a white man tip his hat to a black woman. Please understand that such a gesture is completely unheard of in my country. The white man was an Episcopal bishop and the black woman was my mother. Be kind to

one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ
has forgiven you. Amen.