Sermon for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost

August 29, 2021

James 1:17-27

For the next few weeks, our Epistle reading comes from James. Martin Luther wasn’t a big fan of this letter, because he thought it veered a bit too much into the works righteousness area. But I’ve really come to appreciate the general theme of the letter, that our faith isn’t much use unless it’s put into action.

There’s a line in the text for today that always gets me whenever I read it. “For your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.”

We have this tendency to assume that God feels the same way about things as we do. That God shares our joy when we experience the wonders of God’s creation. That God shares our sorrow when someone dies. These things, I think, are, as Luther would say, most certainly true.

But I’m not sure God always shares our anger.

When James tells us that our anger does not produce God’s righteousness, I think that he wants us to remember that God delights in every single human being, even when we struggle to see anything good in them.

I think that he also wants us to understand that anger is not always the right response, or perhaps more accurately, our anger should not be the ***totality*** of our response. Because anger can be dangerous. It can lead us to a whole host of other things — envy, jealousy, hatred, divisiveness. And those things can prevent us from looking for the good that God sees in every person.

Jesus tells us that it’s not so much what goes into us but what comes out of us that defiles us. And when we’re angry, a lot of stuff can come out of us, a lot of things that aren’t life-affirming, aren’t going to build up others.

Our anger does not lead to God’s righteousness. Whatever the cause for our anger, no matter how justified we think we are to have it.

Now, that’s not to say that our anger isn’t sometimes justified. There are things we *should* be angry about. Needless suffering and injustice *ought* to make us angry.

But it’s what we ***do*** with that anger that matters.

Because it’s really easy for anger to take over our hearts. For anger to take root, to begin to guide our thoughts and actions. To allow it to make us bitter and cynical.

When anger takes root in our hearts, it leads us on paths of destruction.

This is not who we are called to be.

The law, as Paul tells us in Galatians, “is summed up in a single commandment: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The 10 Commandments, all of the laws that Moses lays out in Leviticus or Deuteronomy, they’re about how to live our lives in obedience of the Great Commandment — Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and being, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Simply put, we are called to build up one another, not tear each other down.

We are meant to nurture in ourselves hearts of love, hearts that respond to the world with love. And *then* we can love our neighbor as ourselves.

I know…our neighbors can be really annoying sometimes. It can be hard to hear the words, “love your neighbor as yourself,” and think, “Oh great, I have to love this person who has wronged me horribly. I’m supposed to be invested in their well-being, want them to have a good life, when they hurt me and the people I care about?”

And that can be a real stumbling block for us.

Dallas Willard, in his book on the 23rd Psalm, wrote about how we’re meant to work on having hearts that are loving, rather than starting out trying to love those who frustrate or anger us. If we work on having hearts that are loving, he says, then our actions will flow from there. But if we start by thinking we have to love someone who we think is awful, we’re not likely to get anywhere.[[2]](#footnote-2)

God’s righteousness is not produced by our anger.

But it’s not produced by anything else we do, either. No matter how much we tell ourselves that we believe in justification by grace through the gift of faith, there’s still a small part of us that operates as if we think we can earn God’s favor.

That’s the problem we have with the Law. We forget why it was given, and we fall into the trap of treating it as the way we earn God’s favor. And from there, it’s a short hop to the kind of thinking that feeds our tendency to categorize other people. This person keeps the law the way I think they should, so they must be good. That person doesn’t, so they must be bad.

But God gave the Israelites the Law so they could learn how to be the Chosen People. Keeping kosher is more about forming part of the identity of the Jewish people than whether God thinks it’s right for us to eat bacon wrapped shrimp with cheese sauce.

No other people had a god like the God of the Israelites. No other people had a god who gave them a set of laws that was rooted in justice and mercy the way that God did.

Because no other god delights in humanity the way that God delights in humanity. No other god invites their people to share in that delight. No other god wants to be in the kind of relationship that God wants to be in with us.

And so God offered the people rules to guide their lives that would help them learn to be the Chosen People, help them make that their primary identity. Not so they could more easily judge other people. Not so they would think that God was keeping score about how often they forgot to wash their hands before a meal. Not so they could find more justification for being angry with their neighbor.

Ultimately, the law is about teaching us how to love God, love our neighbor, and love ourselves.

Anger can’t take root in our hearts when they’re filled with that kind of love.

There are days when it is *so incredibly hard* to not give in to the anger that tempts us. But James reminds us that our anger shouldn’t define us. God’s love should.

It is God’s perfect love that offers us healing for our hearts and wholeness for our souls. That sees something worthy of love in every one of us.

When our hearts are ruled by God’s perfect love, then our anger will not define us, but lead us to acts that build up one another. Acts that help us live out our baptismal promises to work for justice and peace in all the world.

May God’s love so fill our hearts that there is no room for anger to take root. And may our lives be examples of that love for the world.

1. Galatians 5:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Life Without Lack*, Dallas Willard, particularly chapter 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)