

## A POST-ELECTION SERMON

### Matthew 5:21-25

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on November 8, 2020, the Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The sermon occurred five days after the Presidential election. The church was celebrating its annual Remembrance Sunday, with a limited number of people present but otherwise closed for the Coronavirus pandemic, and the service was livestreamed.*

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*You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool”, you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.*

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On February 16, 2014, I preached a sermon at the 8:30 a.m. service entitled “When Anger Destroys.” A few minutes after the service, I received a phone call from Bob Ramsey, who had grown up in this church, that his father Chuck had died suddenly on the trip he and his wife Madeline had taken to South Africa, a few weeks after Chuck’s retirement from IRS. Chuck was, as Madeline is, a longtime member and leader of this church, with friendships that run as deep as the waters of the ocean. I knew I could not go into the pulpit and preach about anger after announcing the death of such a beloved member, so I simply read and commented on a lengthy prayer I give at most funerals and memorial services.

Leaving church, one of our long-retired military officers expressed hope that I would one day preach the sermon on anger at an 11:00 a.m. service. While today’s homily is not a repeat of that sermon of six years ago, the nervousness many of us have experienced this past week awaiting the results of a presidential election following the anger and divisiveness that have gripped our nation the past several years prompts me to attempt to hold anger up to the light of the Scriptures to see if they point to a way out. I do so even as we are in that initial though often short-lived period in which many in the nation on both sides of voting are extending the spirit of hope and good will that normally greets our newly elected leaders.

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Though the word “anger” appears over four hundred times in the Bible, anger is not an easy topic for people of faith. We know Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount:

*You have heard that it was said... “You shall not murder” ... But I say to you that if you are angry... you will be liable to judgement...*

*“Be angry but do not sin,” writes the Apostle Paul. “Do not let the sun go down on your anger.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 4:26.

And from the Book of Proverbs:

*For as pressing milk produces curds,  
and pressing the nose produces blood,  
so pressing anger produces strife.<sup>2</sup>*

We have known anger that produces strife, both beneath and above the surface of our national life.

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And yet from the stories of our faith we know that some of our Biblical heroes express anger themselves:

- The writer of Exodus tells us that Moses' anger "burned [so] hot" when the people of Israel worshipped a Golden Calf that he smashed the tablets of stone on which God had written the Ten Commandments for him to deliver to the people.<sup>3</sup>
- Jesus himself curses a fig tree<sup>4</sup> and drives money changers out of the Temple with a "whip of cords,"<sup>5</sup> words which hurt just hearing them.
- And Paul writes to Christians with whom he has been close in Galatia: "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?"<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most intense expression of religious anger comes from the prophets, for whom anger – known as "righteous wrath" – leads them to call for righting society's wrongs. Amos says of his own people Israel:

*...they sell the righteous for silver  
and the needy for a pair of sandals—  
they...trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,  
and push the afflicted out of the way...  
and in the house of their God they drink  
wine bought with fines they imposed.<sup>7</sup>*

Biblical faith does not so float above the world that righteous anger never pulses through our veins nor passes from our lips.

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In that sermon six years ago, I read a poem by the late Stanley Kunitz which has haunted me ever since. It is entitled "The Portrait."

My mother never forgave my father  
for killing himself,  
especially at such an awkward time  
and in a public park,

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<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 30:33.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 32:15.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 11:12-14.

<sup>5</sup> John 2:13-23.

<sup>6</sup> Galatians 3:1.

<sup>7</sup> Amos 2:6-8.

that spring  
when I was waiting to be born.  
She locked his name  
in her deepest cabinet  
and would not let him out,  
though I could hear him thumping.  
When I came down from the attic  
with the pastel portrait in my hand  
of a long-lipped stranger  
with a brave moustache  
and deep brown level eyes,  
she ripped it into shreds  
without a single word  
and slapped me hard.  
In my sixty-fourth year  
I can feel my cheek  
still burning.<sup>8</sup>

This poem is a testament to the poisoning power of *unresolved* anger.

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I fear that over the last decade or so, we have become a nation whose *unresolved anger* – often growing out of centuries of real and profound grievance – has led us to *slap the faces* of even the people with whom we share earth and stars and common dreams. While one interpretation of this week’s election is a *rejection* on the part of the American people of an unbridled expression of anger, whatever anger we have within our body politic will not likely disappear with the results of an election. We cannot just vote our anger away. We must as a people face, acknowledge, understand and address our anger so that we can channel it toward constructive ends; otherwise, it will continue to consume the institutions of our common life – such as churches and schools and businesses and families – which are *not* immune from the lasting sting of its slap.

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In the same chapter on the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus warns against anger, he goes on to say:

*...when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*

Notice Jesus puts such a strong emphasis on *actively seeking* resolution of our anger – on taking the initiative to address the *circumstances* out of which it grows. In fact, he calls us to seek to resolve our anger *before* offering ourselves to God. “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger,” echoes Paul.

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I know this is a religious text describing a religious ritual, but I cannot help but hear it speak to the secular situation in which our nation sits. That is, after all, my job.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15203>.

Even though our Presidential election *appears* to be resolved, there is likely plenty of anger still afoot in our land. Half of us in our country can barely fathom why half of us voted the way we did. It was that way four years ago. It was that way four years before that, and four years before that, and four years before that. The anger that spread like COVID during this election season was a pre-existing condition.

Nelson Mandela once said: “Resentment is like drinking poison and hoping it will kill your enemies.”

In a secular, democratic society, if a person or group has something against us, we must get up from the table, go and seek resolution, then return and offer our gift. The process in a democracy is known as *politics*. It consists of voting, governing, legislating, compromising, choosing between less than perfect choices. As un-revered as the word *politics* has become, it is the only way at our disposal to address our collective anger without falling prey to authoritarianism or violence. If we *give up* on politics, our cheeks will forever burn. If we *stay with* politics, we are much more likely to thrive as a nation and contribute to the thriving of other nations as well.

We owe such commitment to those who have gone before us. We owe it to those who have fought and died. We owe it to those who will come after us, born this year, this week, this day. We owe it to ourselves. And as people of faith, we owe it to God, a crucial part of our offering to the Holy One.

Amen.

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