

Sermon

August 13, 2006 - 10th Sunday after Pentecost

Pastor Bradley Schemling  
St. John's Lutheran Church

Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2

I've never been one of those people who open the Bible, point my finger, and look for what God might be saying to me today.

It can be very dangerous. I tried it while I was preparing my sermon. The first time, I opened my Bible, it turned to Nehemiah. I pointed, and it said, "Then I perceived and saw that God had not sent him at all." Not the right week to get that one!

Jeanette, our music director came into the office while I was playing this game, so I had her do it. She closed her eyes, opened and pointed to Psalm 127: It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil. (pause) Actually, it goes on to say that God gives sleep to the beloved ones.

Well, you can imagine my surprise, when on Tuesday before I went to see the bishop, I opened Ephesians to read the lesson for that was appointed for today:

So then, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.

Use words that are useful for building up

that your words may give grace to those who hear.

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

If I had prayed for God to give me a strategy for living these days, I could not have asked for better words to be provided. In another place in the Bible, it says that when you come into trial the Holy Spirit will provide the words that you need.

Paul mentioned in his announcement that there was anxiety in the church. I've got to tell you that, with the knowledge of Christ's presence, I'm not anxious. Although there is certainly nervousness about what's to come, I feel a deep sense of peace and confidence that comes from trusting that God will provide us with everything we need.

It's appropriate that the Ephesians lesson would put anger on the table as an issue to deal with.

If we were to open our lives and point, my guess is that there's a chance that we might find anger. In my experience of ministry, I would say that anger is the most difficult emotion for many of us to experience and to express. Some of us are so controlled and practiced that there's not a twitch of in our face, when someone hurts or attacks us. Some of us probably have so much anger inside that we can't even let ourselves know

that about ourselves, but our bodies or our attitudes or our quick tempers act it out all the time.

Let's be clear. There is nothing wrong with anger. It is a primitive and aggressive response to threat, to being hurt or endangered. Anger is one of God's gifts that protect us. Sometimes I've even thought of anger as a sign of the Holy Spirit, because even if we cannot find the ways to value ourselves on the surface, there is a deep place that knows that we are created in the very image of God and have the right to live a life of safety and peace. God gave us anger so that we would contain a force at the very core of our being a powerful voice that says no to being hurt. It does have the power to teach us that we have value, even when our life experience has told us otherwise.

Anger doesn't accept violence or pain or threat as a condition for existence. It tells us that something is broken that needs to be fixed.

Anger gives birth to acts of justice because we don't get mad at just the things that happen to us. We get mad at things that happen to others. It is the source of solidarity with the world's pain and suffering. There's the bumper sticker that says, "If you're not angry, you're not paying attention."

Allowing ourselves to get angry about bombs being flung across borders in the middle east; or at the gunshot that tears through living room drapes and into flesh; or at words that demean and damn; or at whole systems that reward some and impoverish others is the beginning of a strategy for remaking the world. It is the force of life that seeks to create abundant life for all.

Of course, one of the reasons we have such difficulty is because we know all too well the power of anger to destroy. We hear stories of repressed rage pounded into children. We know about families who do not speak because they are so angry. And we know all too well our own power to speak words that break down and wound the ones we love the most. Anger is so powerful and so explosive that we either let it run wild into the wrong situations or just hit back instead of cry.

St. Paul's wisdom about anger, about using it as a gift to one another to build up the body to bring grace into the world, is not just smart advice for the church Ephesians. It is a fundamentally different way of seeing that comes when the grace of God is invited to form our anger into action.

I couldn't help but think about Elton John's song, "Don't let the sun go down on me." The song itself is about a failed relationship. It's about one lover that was wounded by the other.

Don't discard me just because you think I mean you harm  
But these cuts I have they need love to help them heal

Don't let the sun go down on me.

Paul's advice about not letting the sun go down on our anger is more than just making sure we deal with our anger before bedtime. It means holding each other in the light of

Christ, no matter what. It is the light of Christ that heals our wounds and provides us with the deepest protect and guidance that we need. When anger partners with Christ, it heals wounds and makes new things. Anger gets transformed into strategies for building up the body of Christ or for saving those who are hurting and for changing the world. Anger can produce words that are graced with truth and compassion. In Christ, anger and being tenderhearted can go together.

This is precisely the story of Christ. In the cross, God's powerful justice that seeks to make things right is made known in the compassion of Christ. God's justice, God's anger, ends up healing the world. It is never judgmental or damning. It is a raging energy that forgives. Out of his pain, Jesus says, "Forgive them for they don't know what they're doing." Jesus takes the violence of the world, he hears the language that is flung at him from the foot of the cross, he experiences the pain of rejection, and he gives it back as the power to love. Even death, our most ancient enemy, is given back to creation as the friend that ushers us into the tender heart of God's eternity.

I'm not suggesting that you go home, open your Bible, and discover your strategy for life, although I learned this week that it does, indeed work sometimes. Ephesians 4:25-5:2 is going to be my guide. What I am confident of, however, is that God's strategy is to save, to love, to bring new life. Christ enters opens up the heart, points and says,  
I love you.  
I love you.  
I love you.