

Wesley United Methodist Church

February 16, 2014

"It's Alright to Hiss..."

Matthew 5:21-26

Some of you can remember back in the 1970s when mood rings were a big fad. They were especially popular with young girls. The theory behind the mood ring was that body heat fluctuates with the emotional state of the wearer...and the ring was attuned to the body's temperature. None of this was established scientifically, of course, but, like most fads, it provided some fun for comedians and cartoonists.

For example, in a 1976 Peanuts comic strip, Peppermint Patty gets so angry at Charlie Brown that her mood ring explodes. Now that's a bad mood.

My favorite example of mood ring humor, however, concerns a woman who reported that her husband was unhappy with her mood swings. So he bought her a mood ring. He hoped that he would be able to monitor her moods and prepare himself accordingly. It worked. He discovered that when she was in a good mood, the ring turned green. And when she was in a bad mood, the ring left a big red mark on his forehead. "Maybe next time," she said, "he'll buy me a diamond."

Everybody gets in a bad mood at some time or another. Some of those moods--however, if not controlled, could lead to some very bad things. All of us, at some time or another, experience anger, resentment, hostility, and rage. Thankfully, we handle it. For some of us, however, anger is a big issue in our lives. It causes us to lash out at our spouses and our children. We unleash it on others on the road or in the workplace. We make ourselves and those around us miserable.

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus confronts the subject of anger head on: "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment,' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or a sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' [an Aramaic term of contempt somewhat like 'numskull'] is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'you fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."

Why would Jesus make these extreme comments about an emotion as universal as anger? It is because the outward act always begins with an inward emotion. I believe we need to give these words of our Lord our most prayerful consideration particularly in this day of urban bombings and school massacres. It appears to me that the number of people, teenagers and adults, walking around like ticking time bombs is increasing. The pervasiveness of anger in our society is reaching appalling proportions. You can't have a civilized conversation with some people without their exploding in an ugly passion on some subject or another. It's scary.

Obviously, only a very few of these people will ever erupt into such fury that they kill somebody, but the potential is always there. So we need to take Jesus seriously when he says that the heart of the problem is the human heart itself. If we are filled with anger and hate, we are all potential murderers. Anger is destructive to others and to ourselves. We know how destructive anger can be to others. We may not know how destructive it can be to ourselves. Anger and hostility is destructive to our hearts. Heart disease is five times higher in a hostile person. We are told that a rattlesnake, if cornered, will bite itself. Anger and resentment are like that. They are destructive and not only to others, but to ourselves as well. And so we ask, "How do we deal with anger in a constructive way? What are the guidelines?"

In the first place, we need to see that there are times when people ought to express their anger. That is something that a lot of good, nice, sweet, decent people need to realize. When Jesus told us to turn the other cheek, he did not mean for us to become doormats for everyone to walk on.

Certainly he was no doormat. Remember how he drove the tax collectors out of the temple? (Mt. 21:12-17; John 2:13-22)? He was angry with those who criticized him for healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:5 even uses the word "anger"). And in Matthew 23:17 he called the Pharisees "blind fools." So we conclude that there is a place for anger. We are wrong if we take these words to mean that all anger is sin. Paul tells us, "Be angry and do not sin" (Eph 4:26). There are times when expressing our anger is the proper thing to do.

There is an old story of a Swami at a village temple in Bengal, who claimed to have mastered anger. When his ability to control his anger was challenged, he told the story of a cobra who used to sit by the path and bite people on their way to the temple. The Swami went to visit with the snake to end the problem. Using mantra, he called the snake to him and brought it into submission. Telling the snake that it was wrong to bite people, the Swami persuaded it to promise never to do it again. And when the people saw that the snake now made no move to bite them, they grew unafraid.

Unfortunately, before long the village boys were tormenting the poor snake by dragging it through the village. Later the Swami again visited the snake to see if he kept his promise. He found the snake miserable and hurting. The Swami, on seeing this, exclaimed, "You're bleeding, what happened?" The snake was in anguish and blurted out that he had been abused ever since the Swami had made him promise to stop biting people. To which the Swami said, "I told you not to bite, but I didn't tell you not to hiss."

We need to know that it is all right to hiss when we are being abused or taken advantage of. We need to express our anger in the face of evil. Remember that even anger is a gift from God. It can be a great motivation force in life. Martin Luther once said, "When I am angry I can pray well and preach well."

Anger is only our enemy when we let it get out of control, or even worse, when it controls us.. But the first guideline is this: there are times when anger needs to be expressed. And there is a second guideline, also as important. It is this: anger needs to be resolved at the first possible opportunity. Immediately after speaking these harsh judgments concerning anger, Jesus says, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. first go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift" (23-24). In other words, he is telling us, anger needs to be resolved at the first possible opportunity. Anger is most destructive when it is allowed to lie dormant for a long time and fester like an infected wound. I have seen people with that kind of anger and resentment in them. The results are often tragic. Remember the old adage never let the sun set on your anger. It's a good principle for everyone concerned. It's good for marriage, family, health, business and relationships.

There is a scene in the movie Forrest Gump that is worthy pondering. Forrest Gump, of course, was a super-successful movie that has been viewed by millions of people. Most people remember the line, "Life is like a box of choklits," but there is another line worth noting. This particular scene has one of the central characters, Jenny, returning to her old home after her father has died. The old farm house is dilapidated and abandoned. As she reflects on the sexual abuse that she endured as a child, she is overcome by rage and begins throwing rocks at the house. The photography is powerful as it shows her rapidly reaching for rocks and then violently throwing them at the house. Jenny finally falls to the ground in exhaustion. The scene closes with Forrest Gump sympathizing and saying, "Sometimes there aren't enough rocks." And that's true. No matter what anyone has done to you, sometimes there just aren't enough rocks. And that's

when we need to surrender our anger, surrender our hatred to God and allow him to replace these negative emotions with love and forgiveness.

Unresolved anger is also a spiritual problem. Anger not only affects our health and our relationships with others, it is important in our relationship with God. That is why Christ tells us that if we are offering our gift at the altar and there remember that our brother or sister has something against us, we are to leave our gift and go, be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. A heart full of anger is a spiritual impediment.

What do you do with your anger? There is a simple book that has become very popular worldwide. It is titled, *The Law of the Garbage Truck: How to respond to People Who Dump on You, and How to Stop Dumping on Others*.

About twenty years ago, David J. Pollay, a public speaker and Psychologist, narrowly escaped a life-threatening car accident when a car without warning ploughed into the taxi in which he was riding. The driver of the other car, who was definitely at fault, shouted obscenities at the taxi driver. However, the taxi driver simply smiled and waved at the obscenity-shouting man, and wished him well. Mr. Pollay was impressed and asked why he had done that? The taxi driver explained, "Many people are like garbage trucks. They run around full of garbage, full of frustration, full of anger and full of disappointment. As their garbage piles up, they look for a place to dump it. And if you let them, they'll dump it on you. So when someone wants to dump on you, don't take it personally. Just smile, wave, wish them well, and move on. Believe me. You'll be happier."

What about you? what would happen in your life, starting today, if you let more garbage trucks pass you by? Here's my bet: You'll be happier.

You would be happier...and you would be in a happier place. Learn to control your anger. Learn to forgive those who have done you wrong. When you are in a mood to kill, either literally or figuratively, pause for a moment and remember Christ's teaching. Turn your anger over to him and walk away with a smile on your face.