

"You Were Asking, Part Two: Hate":
A Sermon Series for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for June 30th 2019 (Third Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 5: 21-26

The question of "hate"...the topic of "hatred"...the second of the topics commended to me as part of this series of sermons based on suggestions made by members of the congregation...the topic of "hatred" is certainly one that has current relevance. While it would be foolish to suggest that social media...

...Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, You Tube, etc. etc. etc. ad nauseum...

...while it would be foolish to claim that these social-media platforms have "created" hate, nevertheless: they **have** provided a convenient method through which to give voice to one's hatreds. Moreover: by facilitating the creation of online communities through which like-minded people can readily find one another, these platforms have made it much easier to have one's hatreds reinforced.

All of which makes the topic of "hate" especially pertinent in the here and now, but none of which ought to lead us to pretend that there is anything particularly new or original about the sad, and at times frightening, actuality of human hatreds.

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We should probably begin by making a distinction: a distinction between "anger" and "hatred". Aristotle appears to have drawn a clear line between the one and the other: between "anger" and "hate". He argued that hatred—unlike anger—leads one to wish for the annihilation of the object of the hatred. That's a useful distinction. However! That distinction, useful though it may be, should not blind us to the fact that, at least at the emotional level, there is a predictable connection between hatred and anger, since a feeling of hatred will almost inevitably involve at least some degree of anger: at a bare minimum as part of the process that leads toward hatred. And yes: for better or for worse: the topic of anger raises unavoidable complexities.

Consider! Consider that "anger" has long been regarded as one of the seven deadly sins. And yet, it is hard to deny that "anger" is probably the most ambiguous of the seven. For starters, there are instances in scripture of what we might call "righteous indignation" or "righteous anger" including—according to some interpreters—the incident in which Jesus overturns the money-lenders tables in the Temple. More generally, anger can often be an early-warning sign that something is amiss: a spark that tells us that we have ourselves been wronged or that someone else has been a victim of injustice.

A useful comparison, I think, can be made between “anger” and “guilt” which, when you dig beneath the surface, are similar in a truly fascinating way. Start with guilt which, of course, is something we have been taught to dislike. And yet, as we also know, one of the things psychopaths and sociopaths tend to have in common, is that they rarely feel a whole lot of guilt. In other words: those of us who are capable of feeling guilt, are in possession of a wonderful mechanism by which we can recognize that we have said or done something hurtful. That’s a good thing, not a bad thing. However! We also know that guilt can be used to manipulate people, and that some people are especially vulnerable to guilt: vulnerable to blaming themselves even in those instances in which they are the aggrieved party! That, of course, is most definitely **not** something to be celebrated. On the contrary, such folks often need some counselling to help them to distinguish between things for which they genuinely ought to feel guilt...

...and genuinely need to make amends...

...as opposed to things for which they are not to blame. In short, guilt can play both a positive role—but also a problematic role—in our lives.

Much the same can be said of anger. As I noted earlier, anger can be a warning sign that something has gone wrong: a sign that we ourselves, or someone we care about, has been harmed. Much of the anger found in scripture, after all, is found in the prophetic writings: writings which exhibit a high sensitivity to injustice. Anger, from a Biblical perspective, is the **correct** response to injustice; it might well be said that a failure to experience even a spark of anger in the face of cruelty and injustice, far from representing something of which we ought to be proud, may simply indicate that we have managed to retreat into a problematic cocoon of apathy. And yet.

Just as guilt can become toxic, so can anger. I suspect we all know people—perhaps some of us are or have been such people—people who pride themselves on being really good at being angry. We tell ourselves that we don’t abide fools gladly. We tell ourselves that we are not going to put up with nonsense. We tell ourselves that we’re “angry as hell, and we’re not going to take it anymore”. And you know: that sort of anger can actually feel real good...which may be the first sure sign that we may be heading in a less than wholesome direction. And I always return...

...always return...to a small verse from the Epistle of James. No New Testament author is more attuned to issues of basic justice than is James, who insists throughout his Epistle that faith which does not give birth to acts of justice and mercy is no faith at all. And yet it is James who also admonishes—early on in his epistle—to *let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, **slow to anger***. Why? Here’s the money quote! *Because the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.*¹ The older I get, the more appreciative I have become of that essential piece of wisdom. *The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God*. Suggesting, I submit, that anger—while often an essential warning-sign that something is amiss—never provides

the tools through which that which is amiss can be made right. *The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.* Never has. Never will.

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I suppose it goes without saying...but ought to be said: what is true of anger is even truer of hatred, starting with the fact that whereas it is not difficult to identify the positive side of anger, it is pretty hard to identify the positives of hate. I spoke earlier of Aristotle's definition of hatred as incorporating the desire to annihilate the object of hate. Hand in hand with that distinction is the unsettling fact that hate, unlike anger, is seldom a passing fancy. Hatred tends to fixate on particular objects: fixates and won't let go. And it is awfully hard to see anything positive in that.

And it doesn't much matter, I think, what underlies the hate. We appear, as human beings, to be hard-wired instinctively to be drawn toward some things and to be repulsed by others. Sometimes that repulsion is a critical warning that spares us terrible harm...but other times it hardens into hatred. Whether the cause of that repulsion is the colour of the other person's skin...the place of worship where they gather...the accent with which they address us...or the shape of their ideology, such repulsion, when it hardens into hatred, is deeply problematic. Not a good thing for the life of the church in here...not a good thing for the life of the world out there...above all, not a good thing for the shape of the soul in here. To return to a point I made at the outset: one of the very real dangers of the high-tech world we now occupy, is that it gives us almost instantaneous access to those who share our repulsions, making it ever so easy to form communities customized for people for whom the ties that bind are a set of shared repulsions and resentments. In that kind of subcultural ferment, hatred easily and frighteningly grows strong. It is hardly an exaggeration to suggest that the human future may very well hinge on our finding ways to address that toxic brew of resentment and hate.

Indeed: in the face of those conflicting—mutually hating—subcultures, it can be easy to succumb to despair. Aristotle believed that one of the differences between anger and hatred is that there is no cure for hatred. I disagree with Aristotle on that score...because I have myself seen hatred turned back and transformed. In Christ all things are possible...which is why...which is why at the end of the day, while I have no illusions about the Church fixing the world when it comes to hatred, I harbour great hopes for the Church being able to embody—to embody and to **exemplify**—a different way, a better way: a people, a community, who have come not only to imagine the possibility of a way beyond hatred, but also a people who have begun to put that peaceable way into practice. Consider first the rekindling of our imaginations...

...a rekindling which in this instance, as in so many other instances, ought to begin at the foot of the Cross. While there has been no shortage of ink spilled over the question of what it is we observe when we observe the Cross of Jesus Christ, what can safely be said of the Church's understanding of the Cross is the conviction that here—at the Cross—we see the collision-point: the point at which human hate and

divine love collide. To quote the Apostle Paul: *while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.*¹¹ At a bare minimum what that ought to tell us, is that the enemy I may well have sworn to hate, is in fact a child of God: created by God no less than I was created by God, and subject—no less than I have been subject—to the seemingly mad-love poured out by the God who, in Christ, was prepared to share our death that, in the end, we might share his life. And let's be honest here. I am quite certain that we all have a list of people of whom it can safely be said: we cannot possibly imagine Christ having been willing to die **for them!** But trust me: each and every one of us also needs to face the awkward fact that we likely show up on at least one such list: a list that someone else has compiled of the people they can't possibly imagine Christ having been willing to offer his life for! In short: to see anyone—friend, enemy, or someone who is a bit of both—to see any human person in the light of Christ's sacrificial offering is to take a tiny step toward reimagining the world, learning to see the world through God's eyes. Without such steps of reimagination, our hearts are unlikely to be nudged into new ways of being, new ways of acting.

Nor need we go any further than the Sermon on the Mount—from which we heard an excerpt earlier—we need to go no further than that bracing sermon, if we want to catch a glimpse of the places such reimagination might begin to take us. Here, as perhaps nowhere else in the New Testament, Jesus lays out a programme of action that most of us will find more than challenging: course work which, for most of us, will represent a life-time worth of challenges! In a passage typical of the sermon, Jesus names the prohibition against murder. Why stop there, however? That, in effect, is the question Christ asks, and answers his own question by insisting that his disciples...

...those through whom the world will come to know Him...

...he insists that we ought not to settle for merely refraining from doing harm to those against whom our anger has been kindled. That might pass muster for the world, but for his followers He sets the bar considerably higher. For us mere anger poses a danger...suggesting that hatred (anger on steroids) is truly beyond the pale. Christ's answer? The costly way of reconciliation. So high a value does he set on reconciliation, that he appears to rank it higher even than worship, suggesting that if we find ourselves at worship, but recall that we have yet to make peace with a sister or brother, we need to set worship to one side in order to seek them out and put things right. [I suppose I should pause here to permit anyone who realizes they need to leave an opportunity to do so.]

Joking aside: I am not oblivious to the fact that there are times when such reconciliation is not possible. It takes two to tango, and if someone shuts you out of their life, it can be hard to reconcile. And I also know...I also know that there are toxic people in this world; I suspect that each of us—having reached the age to which most of us have reached—have had the experience of having been left with no choice but to put up boundaries so that one or more toxic person ceases to have access to us. At that point the way of reconciliation seems to be closed; at that point we may very well fear that there is no hope for us: that we have no choice but to permit hatred to fester. To

which I will respond by simply saying: that's when it is time to pray. And no friends: I offer that not by way of pious claptrap, but because it's the most important thing I am going to leave you with this morning.

And so, yes: here is a bold statement for you. Of all of the distinctively **Christian** spiritual practices, the single most essential and the single most powerful, is the spiritual practice of praying for those we hate. In the words of one of my mentors: "Jesus never said that we wouldn't have enemies, only that we needed to love them."ⁱⁱⁱ Or as the Master himself put it further on in the Sermon on the Mount: *I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*^{iv} While it may well be true that we cannot "force" ourselves to love someone, a critical first-step—especially when dealing with those we find it humanly impossible to love—a critical first step is simply to pray for them. And if you don't know "what" to pray for them, simply pray for their highest good. In other words, simply hand them over to God. It will do them immense good. And trust me: it will do **you** immense good as well.

In Jesus' name! Amen!

ⁱ James 1: 19,20

ⁱⁱ From Romans 5:10

ⁱⁱⁱ William Sloane Coffin

^{iv} Matthew 5:44