

Scripture:

James 1:1-17

Slow to Anger

This passage in James falls into my favourite scripture category. I like how clear it is, how mindful it is, how simple it is. Still it doesn't mean it is easy or I get it right most of the time. I feel like Covid has help highlight all the most important points of faith and scripture. Some people love the passages that say 'do not fear,' 'do not be anxious,' or 'be slow to anger,' and the list goes on. I love them personally but I know a lot of people don't. I love them because they help me refocus and direct my fears, my anger, my resentments and give them up to God. Others would say to me. I don't want to argue with scripture but it's simply not that easy. Many of us are wired to be fearful. That is their personality. The only way many can get out of that pattern is some good therapy because fear is a part of the fabric of their lives (some of you are likely resonating with that right now).

What about when James says be slow to anger? Again, easier for some than others. I am usually quite slow to anger. All my life I have been told I put up with too much. Lately though... with Covid and all that has surrounded it with life I would say I get frustrated quicker than I used to. One pastor began to ask the questions: What is anger? Why does it exist?

"Anger, of course, is a struggle in many families. Many of us carry with us the experiences of our childhood. Maybe your family expressed anger too much; maybe anger was continually present in your home. Maybe your family was afraid of anger, as many are, and you never learned how to express it properly. Many of us struggle with anger in one way or another, but I don't think avoiding anger altogether is the right move. Jesus got angry, you know, so angry at one point in the Gospels that he turned over the tables of the moneychangers! And besides, this passage in the Epistle of James doesn't say you should never get angry. It says you should be slow to anger."¹

So, what is anger anyway? Now, I'm sure there are as many definitions of anger as there are people listening to this message. But in my own life, anger is made manifest most often when what is does not line up with what ought to be. When my kids stall and stall and stall at bed time, when all I want to do is get under the covers and go to sleep, I am liable to get a little angry. Or when I have to ask them five times to put away their toys, or more likely art supplies that are scattered all over the kitchen table. I am liable to get a little angry. What is does not line up with what I think ought to be.

These are small things, of course. Silly, even. What is really a problem is When people have trouble finding well-paying work because of a disability or the colour of their skin, their anger makes sense. What is does not line up with what ought to be. What makes me angry is churches

¹ The Rev. Dalton Rushing, Sunday August 29, 2021. Decatur First United Methodist Church, Decatur, GA 14th Sunday after Pentecost - Year B James 1:17-27

exclude people made in God's image, as if it were the church's job to be God's bouncer. What is does not line up with what ought to be. When whole classes of people feel ignored; when people do the best they can but never seem to be able to get ahead; when society expects you to move on quickly from grief, as if such a thing were possible; when racism, or sexism, or homophobia, or ageism run rampant; when cruelty is rewarded; when bullies flourish; when hypocrisy reigns; when the widow and the orphan are left to fend for themselves, well, I can understand the anger. Honestly, I think those things are supposed to make me angry. What is, in each of these circumstances, does not line up with what ought to be.

And so it is that the writer of the Epistle of James says that everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry, but he doesn't say that you should never be angry. Be slow to grow angry, but be angry about the right things. Being inconvenienced is not the same thing as being marginalized. In fact the message of the Bible is that we are to look out for one another, we are to love God and love others. And a big part of loving others is about finding the places where what is does not line up with what ought to be!

"It ought not to be, in a world of abundance, that children go hungry. It ought not be, in a world set apart as the creation of God, that Christians would get lost in the weeds, missing out on God's grand vision of the beloved community, for everybody, I mean everybody. And, crucially, it ought not be that those who have lost spouses or parents should face great difficulties through no fault of their own, if we as Christians do the fundamental work of justice and care and love.

"True devotion," the writer of the Epistle of James writes, "the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us." These words, this advice, is especially important for Christians in the 21st Century, as we find ourselves enmeshed in what I have heard described as "the outrage industrial complex." It is true that there are plenty of things out there designed to make you mad. And in its own perverse way, being angry can be fun, at least for a little while. But it is likewise true that anger for its own sake is unfaithful."²

I read the other day that for certain trees in the midst of wildfires the "fire begins at the roots, and in some species the fire burns the tree from the inside, such that you can't tell much is wrong with the tree until you take a whack at it, and you see the flames licking out from within. Dealing with anger is very much like dealing with fire in this way. If you aren't careful, it will burn you up from the inside."³

Do you know this feeling? The burning on the inside? Does your anger serve little purpose other than to burn you up and leave you hollow? Does it cause you to lash out in flames unexpectedly? Most of us go through seasons like this, it is part of being human but if it is a prolonged season it is time to sit with the Epistle of James (and maybe a counsellor or pastor). It seems like right now our world needs to sit down with this Anger test before they head to social media, or watch the news or interact with their neighbours or... James can be a bit of a reminder and litmus test. Ask yourself: Have you been quick to listen? Slow to speak? Has your anger come about slowly, deliberately, and upon reflection? Does your anger have a direction? Does it face outward,

² IBID

³ IBID

towards the needs of others, rather than your own comfort? Does your anger cause you to act in love, rather than in self-defense? Does it cause you to welcome the word planted deep inside you, rather than to burn you up from the inside?

It's not easy, to do this work for ourselves. It is much easier to go along with the masses and follow the pattern of get angry about whatever the controversy of the day happens to be. It's easier to go along with anger when you find yourself feeling tweaked, or called to account, or challenged in your approach to work or family or life or faith. But when we look at scripture, and at the writings of the prophets, or of Paul, when we look to the sayings of Jesus, they don't lift up selfish stubbornness as a virtue. Self-righteousness is held up as a virtue. The virtues found in scripture are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, hope and self-control."

Through scripture our fore-parents tell us to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry - and to be angry about the right things.

It may not be easy every day but if we remember that "every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from God, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all. We are created as the gift, as we live into who we are created to be we create a world of health, beauty and wholeness.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, teach us to be gracious: quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry - and then, angry about the right things. Allow our hearts to be broken by the things that break yours, and spur us toward the kind of true devotion that makes us agents of your healing in this world. Amen.