

“The Well Tempered Life”

Ephesians 4:25-32

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A big piece of news that hit the social media world this past week was Facebook’s press release concerning its new reaction buttons that users can add to posts and comments that they and others make. Now I know that not everyone here is a Facebook user, but I think most of us can appreciate what these buttons represent when it comes to allowing individuals to express themselves. In the past, Facebook had but one choice when it came to the reaction users could leave on a post...that little “Like” button that appeared as a “thumbs up.”

Facebook is now expanding the choice of buttons to communicate one of six reactions. Using data it collected from its users...Facebook added the five most popular responses from its user base. Besides the traditional “like” button, there are reactions that communicate “love,” “haha,” “wow,” “sad,” and “angry”. Angry being represented with a red-faced, narrow-eyed pout.

As I heard the news of this announcement, I could not help but think of the reading I had selected for this morning from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians. The one that begins with the words “be angry.” You see when you hit that “angry” response on Facebook, you are deciding to “be angry” and chances are that angry reaction will remain. It becomes a permanent expression unless of course you take the time to go back and “undo” the response.

Paul on the other hand says that even though we as Christians can go ahead and be angry, that we shouldn’t let the sun go down on our anger. In other words, make sure your anger gets resolved. Don’t let your anger remain. Paul knew that there was something about anger that is detrimental to the kind of life and community that Christ sought to establish for his followers. “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger.” These words of Paul are an expression of hope that before the end of the day or perhaps even before the end of their life, his listeners would find a way and a reason to let go of anger. There is value in letting go of anger. As I thought about those new Facebook reactions I wondered if maybe Facebook needs to develop a resolved anger button. I’m not sure what it would look like, but like Paul, I believe

it important that we do not stay angry. Too much anger, especially unresolved, can be the source of a great deal of destruction.

Each one of us has experienced anger in our lives. It is a natural human reaction and feeling. Anyone of us can find reasons to get angry on a daily basis...especially if you find yourself driving in GTA traffic! Yet as we all know there are other instances and events in our lives that can ignite an angry response within us. Maybe you're a parent dealing with a misbehaving child, or perhaps you work in sales and find yourself with a customer filled with unrealistic demands, maybe you are the victim of a perceived injustice, or maybe you are just surrounded by angry people and find that it's wearing off on you!

After all, anger is contagious...like a disease. You know, it's amazing how we will raise the alarm bells when something like the breakout of the Zika virus comes along...which we should because of the dangers it poses to human health and well-being. But sometimes maybe another breakout we need to be equally aware of is when anger establishes a foothold and it starts to spread. Left unchecked, anger can be a destructive, life-limiting force that threatens our well being. History is full of examples of mobs of people and whole countries who have allowed anger to take over and result in some dire consequences.

Some politicians and leaders have long understood the power of tapping into such anger. This past week I was watching a news piece that was dissecting how one of the main strategies of some politicians is to find a way to appeal to voter anger. Observers have noted how in Europe and in North America these days, voter anger is measured at an all-time high...at least in recent history. Anger is a powerful force when it comes to spreading news or getting a message to go "viral." According to the NY Times website, news that incited an angry response in its readers was 34% more likely to be shared. You see, by appealing to anger, one has a better chance of getting their message to spread quickly.

The danger associated with this is that researchers have noticed how by appealing to someone's anger or by getting them angry, that person will not take the time to think below the surface of their anger. This makes sense since anger is a feeling, an emotion...it can stand in the way and cloud our ability to think rationally. You see, by taking advantage of anger, politicians or anyone for that matter can encourage the spread of misinformation. Chances are

if you're angry you're not thinking clearly, you're not considering the facts. This research only confirms the words of an old proverb that describes "anger as a condition in which the tongue works faster than the mind."

You know, the word anger, it literally finds its origins in words that mean to become "narrow" or "constricted." There is something about anger over the ages that have made many culture notice that it causes persons and peoples to withdraw in a sense...to be consumed...mostly with themselves. Jewish wisdom literature describes anger as a form of idolatry. It is written about one who is angry, "that if a scholar his wisdom will depart from him, and if he is a prophet his prophetic spirit will depart from him." In other words, one who is angry loses touch with the bigger picture and the larger truth. It becomes a form of idolatry because all of a sudden, when we are angry, we can find our needs as being the most important ones. We want to be in control. We want to be God.

Anger at its root stems from a desire to control one's surroundings. I anger out of the frustration that things are not going my way: others aren't listening to me, I can't get anything done. Except the basic fallacy of this is that none of us has the right to the expectation that things go "my way" to begin with — nor can I yell and scream until they do. You see, anger says it is I rather than God who controls my world. What we end up with, when we have a lot of angry people going around trying to control their own surroundings, each person trying to have things their own way... sooner or later what you end up with is chaos. It becomes a battle of the wills with those around us. It separates people from one another and God.

This is why Paul says in his letter, when it comes to anger, "do not give the Devil a way to defeat you." Other translations say do not give "the Devil a foothold." Some of you may remember from a couple of weeks ago how I mentioned that the Devil, in many ways, represents the isolating power at work in the world and in our lives. Paul sees this kind of power at work when anger is left to fester and grow. We turn inwards, we narrow, we constrict, our anger cuts us off from others and ultimately God because we fall into the need to be in control. We lose our sense of wonder, of awe and connection. Our world gets very small.

A couple of months ago I attended a lecture given by Dr. Charles Fensham, professor of Theology at Knox College at the University of Toronto. In his presentation he wanted us to

consider the importance of having a sense of awe and wonder in our lives. It is a sense of awe and wonder that actually builds both human and divine connection. Dr. Fensham cited the results of an experiment in which participants who intentionally spent time in nature, perhaps looking at trees or the beauty of surrounding for an extended period of time became filled with a sense of awe. The result of those individuals was compared to people who spent their time looking at a brick wall. The difference between the two groups was startling. The ones who found themselves filled with a sense of awe and wonder, were more apt to reach out to others, to buy you a coffee, or be moved to some other noble or benevolent action. While the ones who spent their time looking at the wall displayed no such empathy or connection towards others.

I think there is something important in this as it relates to our anger. Because I believe that when we are angry, it is impossible for any of us to experience a sense of awe. In fact, when we anger, and throw a temper tantrum or move into a rage, we want others to be in awe of us. We want others to notice us...to fear us. There is something about this that is deceitful. You see, when we are angry, we are robbed of our sense of wonder and appreciation of the larger world that surrounds us. We lose the connection with our Creator. We lose our empathy and our deeper connection to each other. We lose the gift to be a blessing unto others.

Now I know what some of you may be thinking, but what about the things in life that we deserve to be angry about? Doesn't our anger show that we care about something? If we don't get angry aren't we just being apathetic?

Well yes and no. You see, so much of the anger we experience is about tends to be about us. The feeling I experience when I believe I have been offended. It's the angry that becomes idolatry. There is a different kind of anger and perhaps a better word we could use to describe it is passion. It's what we experience as people and as individuals when we encounter the greater evil and injustices that fill our world. It's what we should experience when we hear about young women being abused and objectified by the sex trade, we should experience this kind of anger when we hear news of another mass shooting or act of violence in a school. It's not that idolatrous sense that someone has crossed me or upset me, but our reaction towards

evil when we encounter it. Injustice should disturb us and disturb us greatly. But I feel that this is an emotion often lacking today. We are so thoroughly inundated with news of violence and injustice that very little phases us anymore. Indeed, to be passionate about the greater infractions against right and wrong is impossible when we become wrapped up in our own personal offenses and temper tantrums.

It can be difficult to let go of those more personal offenses. We may think we have let go of our anger when perhaps we haven't. You know, maybe something along the lines of the story of a young couple who in their marriage had been working through some personal differences. One day, one spouse said to the other, "When I get mad at you, you never fight back. How do you control your anger?" The other responds by saying, "When you get angry I clean the toilet bowl." "How does that help?" says the first. "I use your toothbrush," responds the other. Now to be clear, that is NOT a Christian response to anger! It's not an anger management strategy I recommend. But it does remind us that many who when dealing with anger, well they really haven't resolved it. They are perhaps still doing more harm than good to their own self...and to another. We can remain on a destructive, rather than a constructive path.

It is no wonder that Paul wants his listeners to find a way to resolve such anger. I love the way Paul puts it in his letter when he writes, "say what people need—words that will help others become stronger." That's why Paul encourages his listeners to be stronger than the anger that seeks to control them, to show the strength of God's Spirit at work. He refers to it as "the Spirit to show that God will make you free when the final day comes." Free of many things I suspect, but most importantly in this case free of that kind of anger that suffocated and constricted their lives and relationships and connection to others. It's a matter of allowing the Spirit of Christ to create within us a good temper. A good temper which is a sign of spiritual strength...the strength of a better character.

That's what the Spirit does, it gives us a better temper. Think of how the quality of things like a piece chocolate or chunk of steel are often measured by their temper. Well tempered chocolate is known for its strength its shine, its purity. Well tempered chocolate can withstand higher temperatures before melting. The same goes with steel. When steel is

tempered, it is a process through which hardness is actually removed in order to make it stronger, less brittle and more resistant to the stresses it will face. So it is with each of us when we receive the Spirit of Christ. We actually begin to achieve that well-tempered life. The kind of life that enables us to take the heat, give off a little shine...be stronger...not only for ourselves, but for the sake of others and for the sake of our fragile human community.

After all, the Spirit of Christ is one that seeks to resolve angry ways. I know it may sound strange to some. Through the ages, God has often been pointed to as a vengeful, wrathful God. A God who is into smiting and sending plagues. I suppose if you're the angry type...that's the kind of God for you...it's the kind of God you want. Yet we can forget that even that Old Testament God, that God of the Hebrew scriptures was a God who did not remain angry. God sought time and again to restore that relationship to the people through a renewed covenant and relationship. A covenant built on words of faith, words that people needed to hear, words that made others stronger.

It is a covenant that God makes with this again in Christ. As the Christ, God comes as one who yes is impassioned, as the one who yes, overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple in the face of injustice, and yes, as the one who was the recipient of the anger of so many in his torture and crucifixion. Yet in Christ we encounter a God, who does not remain angry.

Christ is the ultimate resolution of God's anger for us. In him we encounter a God who looks at us and the world and hit's the "love" button. Christ resolves to be God's good word given to us so that by his Spirit we might discover the freedom and peace of a well-tempered life. The kind of life Paul was encouraging in those Ephesians and us when he said, "Be kind and loving to each other, and forgive each other just as God forgave you in Christ."

Amen.