

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Being Human: Wrath and the Peacemaker”
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Isaiah 50:4-9a; Matthew 5:9, Mark 11:1-10

“Don’t get mad, get even.” We often laugh when we hear this quote (and its variations), as it’s often heard in comedy settings. But this quote, attributed to Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. and used by his sons, Jack and Bobby, actually speaks to wrath. Many of us have heard, and perhaps used, this quote in our daily lives.

As I was searching for the person this quote is credited to, I came across a book by the same title—its full title being, *“Don’t Get Mad, Get Even... the Big Book of Revenge.”* It’s described as: “More than 200 utterly satisfying ways to get revenge on the fatheads who make life that little bit less worth living every time they get out of bed.” Last published in 2006 and now out of print, you can still get it on Amazon through third-party sellers ... and the going price is a mere \$558.10. And while I’m sure (at least I hope!) that people bought the book for a grin and a giggle, I just couldn’t find the humor in it.

Anger, is a normal emotion. We all feel angry at times. Anger can allow us to recognize and respond to injustices toward ourselves, and in the world. It can motivate us to seek solutions... and encourage us to heal damage.

But anger left unchecked is not only unhealthy, it can be dangerous and destructive. It can turn in on itself, feeding on itself until it distorts our sense of right and wrong and it can turn into wrath. Wrath transcends anger and turns our agenda to hurting and bringing pain to those who hurt us ... or those whom we fear have the power. Dante called wrath a “love of justice perverted to revenge and spite.” Wrath is considered one of the “deadly sins” because it leads us to work for vengeance instead of love.

And, as with the other sins we have examined throughout this series, there is an antidote: being a peacemaker.

“Blessed are the peacemakers...” Notice that Jesus did not say “peace-lovers, or peace-hoppers, peace-dreamers or even peace-prayers”, ... he said the **peacemakers**. Too often in our world, we associate “peace” with the absence of war. In the 1900’s, 292 peace treaties were signed. So far in this century, 39 have been officially recorded. Do we live in a peaceful world? I think not. Certainly not the kind of peace Jesus is talking about. And in our personal lives, when we settle an argument, we say we have made peace. But have we? So often we harbor bad feelings, even resentment, and carry that baggage with us. Is that really peace?

When Jews greeted each other, they would say “Shalom” – one of my top five favorite words in the Bible. We all know that Shalom means peace ... but do we really understand the scope of it? This big simple-sounding word means health, prosperity, fulfillment, freedom from trouble, harmony, and wholeness. They were wishing each other the full presence, peace, harmony and prosperity of all the blessedness of God. It’s a beautiful word.

The Greek verb that “peacemakers” comes from means “to do, or to create.” It is an energetic word demanding action and initiative. A peacemaker is never passive ... their very being is always active in the making of peace.

Matthew 5:9 says “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” The original Greek translates, ... “they will be sons of God.” The reason I bring this up, is that there is a difference in intention. We are all God’s children, and the use of the word “sons” does not leave we women out of the blessing!

But “Children of God” means being part of the family. “Sons of God” was used to mean not only a part of the family, but also those who share resemblance to their heavenly Father. Those who actively participate in God’s mission of peace ... in Shalom. Jesus is saying that as we become peacemakers, we will be recognized as the sons and daughters of God who share in God’s name and God’s mission. Indeed, we are all God’s children ... we are all part of God’s family. But are we all peacemakers? Are we all sons and daughters of God? Peacemaking, true peacemaking, is a divine work. And Jesus is the ultimate peacemaker.

On this day, Palm Sunday, we celebrate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. On that first Palm Sunday, the crowds lay down their branches and cloaks, and spread them on the street before him ... literally giving Jesus the royal treatment. They had heard about his miracles and regarded him as the leader who would deliver them from the Roman Empire’s domination. Quoting Psalm 118, and seeing the prophecy of Zechariah fulfilled, they rejoiced as they welcomed their new King. Jesus would now free them from oppression. Now things would be the way they should be! But Jesus himself came profoundly-- yet quietly ... proclaiming the peaceful reign of God.

New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan remind us that there was also another procession that day. As Jesus came from the east, a Roman procession came from the west. As Jesus came on a donkey in peace, the other procession came with horses and weapons. As one came for deliverance, the other came to ensure oppression. As one came in peace, the other came in threat of violence.

Jesus could have retaliated, but he chose not to. There are a lot of things Jesus could have done, but he came with an agenda. There are those who see Jesus as being meek at this point ... he was not. Matthew 5:5 of the Beatitudes says, “Blessed are the meek...” One way to define meekness is “strength under control.” We often think of a meek person as someone who is passive and lets others take advantage of them. This was not Jesus. Biblical meekness requires strength ... a lot of strength. Biblical meekness requires control ... a lot of control. Jesus had both ... and he was incredibly proactive.

Those with Biblical meekness trust in God, commit their way - and their ways - to God, and wait for God. Sounds like the makings of a peacemaker, doesn’t it? “But sometimes I just get so angry,” we say. Well, there is a place for anger. Anger at injustice. But there is no place for wrath. “Vengeance is mine, says the Lord.” What we are called to do is make a place for Shalom. We all have dozens of opportunities every single day to make peace in our world. But we need to be sensitive enough to see our opportunities, and close enough to God that we will choose to do so. It is then that we become not only God’s children, but also sons and daughters of God ... reflecting God’s likeness.

And so, the challenge is to ask ourselves, “What can I do this week to be a **peacemaker**? What can I do to be a reflection of God’s Shalom?” As we enter into this most Holy Week, may we focus on what is known as the Peace Prayer of Saint Francis.

Let us pray:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master,

Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand;

To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

