

Guarding the Fellowship

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. E. Stanley Ott
Matthew 5:21-26

January 24, 2016

I know if you are watching this on January 24 you are most likely at home with the evidence of a gigantic blizzard all around you. While we treasure the weekly times the fellowship of God's people gather to worship the Lord who loves us, we also know the Sabbath was made for us and there are times when good sound judgment says, "Stay home." I remember we once had a nearly two-foot snowfall on a Saturday in Pittsburgh and I called the local police chief to ask his thoughts on worship Sunday. He said, "Well you have to make your own decision but I will tell you that we have one patrol car out, it has chains on the tires, and it's stuck!" I said, "Thank you, Floyd, that's all I need to know!" And I must say sitting in this chair for a fireside chat with you – minus the fire – is rather nice.

I do want to mention a couple of things to you. We rejoice with Thea Jeshke, our Student Ministries Manager, and her husband, Aaron, on the birth of Isaiah Earl, born last Monday. Our prayers are with David Jordan-Haas and his family on the death of his father this week. For your prayers, please keep our Haiti mission team in mind. They are scheduled to fly home Monday. The gathering for our coming summer's SMPs, Summer Mission Projects, is now scheduled. For other announcements, you can look at our bulletin on the website.

We are seeking a new spiritual renewal here at VPC—a new depth in our relationship with the God who loves us. As a guide, we are enjoying the wonderful Sermon on the Mount given by Jesus. The Mount, by the way, was simply a large grassy field that overlooked the Sea of Galilee. I've been there. It's a beautiful setting for a masterful word. In the opening words of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks to the hearts of those who would know our God and the life God offers. So we hear words like blessed are those who are poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek and so on.

In Jesus' day, the group known as the Pharisees didn't feel poor in spirit, they didn't feel like they were mourning or that they were meek. They thought they had it figured out, that to obey God's laws was to earn God's favor and they were doing that, at least they thought, in an outward manner. But Jesus said, "*Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,*" and he goes on to offer six illustrations of what he means, what are called antitheses. The first has to do with anger, which we will look at this morning.

Let me tell you right up front, Jesus is going to raise the bar so high that no one, not the Pharisees or any religious person can ever do it—which is so that you would know you are poor in spirit, that you need God, that you grieve your sins, that you are humble. Jesus wants you to know the only way to have a relationship with God is to stop trying and start trusting—trusting Jesus. Yet, as Jesus raises the bar, he does want us to up our game, to increasingly behave in ways that honor him and that bring joy to people. So hear the first part of our text for today, beginning at Matthew 5:21: *You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'* ²² *But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.*

So Jesus refers to the sixth of the Ten Commandments, "Thou shalt not kill," or more literally, "You shall not murder." The Pharisees knew, as we all know, that the outward action of murder is terrible and whoever does it will be subject to judgment. The judgment here would be the lower courts. But then Jesus says, "If you are angry with a brother or sister [and by brother or sister he means a fellow Christian or someone close to you], you will be liable to the judgment of what we call the Supreme Court, and if you insult someone or call a person a fool—whether a dumb idiot or a stupid jerk, you are liable to the very judgment of hell! I was in a store last Wednesday and the customer in front of me was unhappy with some tax problem and he called those in charge a very colorful word I won't repeat here. Jesus says the penalty for a sustained anger or for saying such things is the same as an actual murder.

Of course, all anger is not sin. We see in Scripture that our holy God is angered by injustice, angered by sin, by the behaviors that de-value and damage people. Jesus clearly was angry

when he cleared the temple of those who abused and used people. If there is an attack, a threat or some ill treatment aimed at you or someone significant to you, or there is something that is deeply disappointing to you, the experience of anger is quite normal and such reaction is not sin itself. Initially, anger is simply an emotional response to something and the real issue is always what you do with your anger. Does your anger lead you to resolve a situation, to defend a person, to address some inappropriate or inadequate behavior or does your anger lead you to diminish, damage or destroy?

One day, I came across two huge zucchinis at a Farmer's Market and, following a process my son developed, made a soup, the final step of which put the soup in the blender. When finished, I couldn't seem to get the blender pitcher off of its base. So I rotated it—too much—and suddenly the pitcher came loose, minus its bottom, and the soup flowed all over the counter. Angry? I was instantly so red hot angry I could have melted lead! Let's just say the other residents in the house all headed for the hills. That's simply temper, what I would define as hot anger. But there is another kind of anger. I would call it a cold anger. Hot anger is a flash and a crash and its over—and you managed it well or you hurt something or someone. Cold anger is different. It's calculating. It doesn't forget. Cold anger refuses to be pacified. It broods, it nurses, and it keeps the anger going.

There is the story of a peace-loving Quaker who owned an ornery cow. Every time he milked her, it was a clash of wills. One particular morning, she was unusually irritable. As the farmer began to milk her, old Bessie stepped on his foot with all her weight. He struggled silently, groaned a little under his breath, pulled his foot free, and then sat back down on the stool. She then swished her tail in his face like a whip. He leaned away so it wouldn't be able to reach him but now he is annoyed. Next, she kicked over the bucket which by then was half full of warm milk. He started over, mumbling a few words to himself, you can see his heat rising as the sweat trickled down his neck. The hot anger is flaring.

When the Quaker was finished with the ordeal, he breathed a sigh of relief, picked up the bucket and stool, and, as he was leaving, she hauled off and kicked him against the barn wall twelve to fifteen feet away. That did it. He stood to his feet marched in front of his cow, stared into those big eyes, and as he shook a long bony finger in her face he shouted, "Thou dost know that I am a Quaker. Thou dost know also that I cannot strike thee back...But I *can* sell thee to a Presbyterian!"¹ Now I am not quite sure what that says about Presbyterians but you can see the shift from his hot anger to a cold calculating anger, a sustained anger and nothing good for Bessie was going to come of it!

Jonathan Haidt describes our emotional side as an elephant and our rational side as the rider on the elephant.² So the idea is that the rider guides where the elephant goes and all is well, but if the elephant gets out of control, there is nothing you can do to stop it. Hot anger, the anger of your temper, is the elephant and when you lose your temper the rider loses control and you will do things and say things that diminish, damage and destroy people and things. Cold anger, the sustained anger, is the rider and when the rider very deliberately guides the elephant to damage and destroy the result can be even more devastating.

I believe the Apostle Paul was talking about hot anger when he said, *be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil* (Ephesians 4:26-27). But if you allow the anger to continue, to nurse it and rehearse it, then you allow it to turn into cold anger and the consequence will be to damage your own life as well as the lives of others. There are two words for anger we find in the New Testament. One deals with hot anger, the other with cold anger. So when Jesus says²² *But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment*, it is not surprising that the kind of anger Jesus refers to is cold anger. Calculated anger. Sustained anger. The anger that destroys the most deeply.

¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Quotations and Illustrations*, p. 34

² Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*

Dale Bruner points out that in five of the six illustrations Jesus gives to show that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees, that Jesus uses a three-part structure: the old commandment – such as You shall not murder – the new commandment – if you are angry or call people names you come under fierce judgment which drives us back to needing the grace of Jesus – and, finally, Little Steps of Obedience. The little steps of obedience are practical suggestions. So our text discussing anger continues with this statement: ²³ *So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*

Jesus calls you and me to master our anger – our cold anger and certainly our hot anger too – and, at the same time, he knows we live messy lives and we are going to mess up. And when it dawns on you, “I lost my cool and I yelled at this person or I slammed my fist on the table hollering at that person or in some calculating long term way have hurt, diminished, damaged or destroyed something or someone,” then you are to seek reconciliation immediately. Right now. To the extent of turning off this sermon and doing it!

Jesus puts it in the context of worship. You are worshipping God, in the midst of offering your gift, and it hits you, Phil, Mary, Bill or Janine has something against me, then stop worshipping God, get out of there and be reconciled. This is stunning when you think about it. Jesus puts your reconciled relationship with somebody as a higher priority than your worship! Your hot anger and your cold anger can only hurt other people and Jesus is saying very clearly, “I don’t care how reasonable you think your anger is. Guard the fellowship. Get over yourself, get over your anger and get right *right now* with the people in your life.

Margaret Jensen tells how, in the early years of her mother, Ella Tweten’s marriage, that Ella dreamed of having a new dress for spring. In those years, Ella and her husband were very poor. Ella grew tired of the worn old dresses she had and she wanted a new dress that would be bright and colorful. She also wanted to buy her husband a new lamp. Secretly, she began saving her pennies, until finally she had enough money to buy the lamp and some pretty pink cloth to make herself a dress. When the dress was finished, Ella put it on and danced around the kitchen, feeling so beautiful and carefree. At that very moment, her husband returned home. When he saw that new dress, he was enraged by her waste of money. In his hot anger, he tore the dress to bits while shouting at her about her foolishness. Ella was left to cry in a corner, so hurt and ashamed.

Ella wrapped a few tattered pieces of the dress in paper, and hid them away. Over the next few days, Ella’s heart became more and more closed to her husband and her cold anger grew and grew. She decided to leave him. Both hot anger and cold anger diminish, damage and destroy. The following Sunday morning, Ella went to church and heard Mark 11:25: *And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.* No matter how hard Ella tried not to hear those words, to block out those words, shut out those words, still they sunk in.

Ella returned home that day, and with tears streaming down her face, she threw the last shreds of cloth from her dress into the fire. Again, at that very moment, her husband came home to find his crying wife burning the last bits of her dress. Her agony broke his hard heart. He took her in his arms and asked for her forgiveness. Ella Tweten and her husband were married for fifty-eight years.³ Love covers a multitude of sins. Put a lid on your hot and cold anger – and if you remember someone has something against you – guard the fellowship – and work to get it right – right now!

³ Margaret Jensen, *First We Have Coffee* (Eugene OR; Harvest House Publishers, 1995), pp. 166-171, “Dynamic Illustrations”, JFM99.

