

The Real Enemy

A Sermon by The Rev. Ken Calhoun

First United Methodist Church Athens, Texas

July 4, 2010

Romans 8:31-39

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

*“For your sake we are being killed
all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be
slaughtered.”*

No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

In 1992 a group of professors from the Moody Bible Institute compiled this startling information: since 3600 B.C., a little over five thousand years ago, the world has known only 292 years of peace. In 5600 years of recorded history, 5,600 years, we've had only 292 years of peace. During the remaining period, 14, 351 wars, large and small, have been waged, and in those wars 3.64 billion people have died. The value of the property that we have destroyed in warfare would be equal to a golden belt that circled the entire earth 97.2 miles wide and thirty-three feet thick. Since 650 B.C. there have also been 1,656 arms races, only sixteen of which did not end in a war. And those sixteen ended in the economic collapse of one or all of the countries involved in the race. Those are some pretty sad and startling statistics. You would think that somewhere in the midst of all that we human beings would have cried out, “Enough. Enough. No more war.” But it seems that we have an almost bottomless and endless capacity for conflict of all kinds, of the most heinous types. Now, sometimes war and death are the only means to peace and justice, but each and every time we must use those means, it comes as a testimony to our failure as human beings to fulfill God's desire for us. It is not what God wished for us, and it represents our rebellion.

Oswald Chambers wrote that peace is not the absence of war; it is the presence of God. Now there's very little that any of us here as individuals or even as a collective group can do to directly put an end to warfare. What we can do in that arena: we can pray for our leaders, we can pray for those who suffer in the midst of all of this, and offer what signs of support we can for those who must be a part of warfare in all of its ugliness. In the end, I've come to the realization, there's really only one person I can have any significant impact over, and that's me. And the older I get, the less I am inclined to believe I have a tremendous amount of control over that. But with God's help, what we can do is to focus on our own attitudes about anger, hatred, revenge, conflict, keeping in mind that every small act or word of anger, every feeling of hatred, every act of retribution, contributes to the whole of the evil of this world.

You see, we're not at war with one another, we're not at war with tyrants, we're not at war with our neighbors, we're not at war with our family members. We're at war with an almost unseen evil force in this world. Evil is a real thing. It is a real presence, and as we participate in acts of aggression, individually or collectively, when we are filled with anger, when we are filled with hatred for someone, we participate in that evil. We hare in it; we strengthen it.

In the Sixth Chapter of Ephesians Paul wrote "We are not fighting against humans. We are fighting against forces and authorities and rulers of darkness and powers in a spiritual world." In that battle we are as one of the civil rights activists in the '60's said, we're either a part of the problem or part of the solution. In the book The DiVinci Code, which is a wonderful book of fiction, I trust you're aware of that. It made a great movie and it makes great reading, but it has little to do with history. We know an enormous amount about the history of that period. We know who commissioned the painting of The Lord's Supper, we know why DiVinci painted it, we know an enormous amount about it. One of the things we know about it, however, tells us something about ourselves and about this whole business of how anger and evil are interwoven together. One of the things we know about that painting is that when DiVinci was painting it, he got into a very heated and unpleasant disagreement with another painter, and they became terrible enemies. And DiVinci devised an interesting way of getting even. And, by the way, there's no getting even. There's not such thing as "getting even." To begin with, we don't want to get even; we want to get one up. But DiVinci came up with this great idea. He painted that man's face on Judas Iscariot. And he knew that for evermore that man that he hated so would be seen as the vision of the person who turned Christ in to the authorities, the most hated man of all history. And as he was painting the painting, and the people came and watched the progress of it, they knew who that man was. They recognized his face. They knew what DiVinci had done. I'm sure some of them thought it was horrible, and some of them thought it was rather humorous. But as DiVinci continued to work on the painting, there was something that he could not finish it because he could not get the face of Christ painted right. Try as he may, with every painting the features were not right. They didn't fit. It didn't look right, and he could not get comfortable with it. And he would take the colors off and repaint it over and over again, but he could not make it look

right. And DiVinci himself finally came to the conclusion, the realization, that the reason he could not paint the face of Christ was because of the bitter anger and hatred he had in his heart for this other man. So he went and he painted over the face of Judas Iscariot, painted over the man's face with just a nondescript human form. And then he was able to paint the face of Christ and finish the painting.

Our anger and our hatred stand, not between us and our fellow man, they stand between us and God. They stand between us and Christ. They stand as a barrier to our being able to see Christ and to be seen by him. Anger and malevolence and hatred, whether it is towards an individual or as an attitude of your being, are a deadly, serious disease. And God's grace is the only cure. And they're deadly, by the way, not only to your spirit and your soul and your emotions, but you know, they're also deadly to your body. Medical research has found some remarkable evidence linking a whole host of physical ailments to anger and a malevolent disposition. I know this first hand because in 1996, I was part of a research study by Dr. Emilio Perez at Methodist Hospital in Houston measuring the physiological responses to anger and frustration. Some day I'll tell you the whole process and how we went through it, but it took a few months. When I went into the thing, I assumed that there would be a correlation between anger and frustration and things like blood pressure and pulse. You know, you get mad, you expect your blood pressure to go up, you expect your pulse to go up. What I did not expect—what I was amazed by—was the chemical and biophysical reactions and changes that took place in my own body as a result of anger and irritation. It was almost as if God has created us in such a fashion that we are going to suffer physically if we are determined to ignore his admonitions to gracious living and forgiving lives. If we are determined to ignore his call to live graciously and to live forgiving lives, then he has designed us such that we will pay for it physically. Anger is hurtful. It is hurtful to the physical heart. It is hurtful to the spiritual heart as well.

When I was writing this sermon, I remembered a quote from Frederic Beekner, a Catholic theologian, and one of my favorite authors. I think I like him because he writes little books. But he writes great books. And one of his books is called Wishful Thinking, and I had loaned it to someone many years ago and they failed to return it. It's been out of print for twenty years, and he has a quote in there about anger. It's a great little book. What he has done is taken a series of words, arranged them alphabetically like a dictionary, and then he writes out the definition of them from a theological point of view. In fact the subtitle is Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC. And then as I was thinking about that, I remembered this wonderful service on the internet called Amazon.com. And I pulled it up and sure enough, there were bunches of them out there. I ordered one, had it shipped overnight, and I got it back. And so I can share with you what Beekner says about anger. Listen carefully. It is so marvelously true.

Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor the last toothsome morsel both the pain you were given and the pain you are giving back. In many ways it

is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

Our anger, our hatred, our unwillingness to be forgiving and gracious that causes pain emotionally, that causes pain physically, that causes pain spiritually, they separate us one from another, and they separate us from God. If we succumb to hating those who hate us, being angry at those who have wounded us, then we become our own enemy. Evil wins in this world, not by overcoming good. It cannot, it will not, it never has. Evil overcomes good in this world not by overcoming it, but by absorbing it. Not by breaking us down until we give in, but by enticing us along until we join in.

Let us resolve within ourselves to fight all kinds of anger in the only place we can: within ourselves. We pay great honor and tribute to our veterans and to our nation, as well we should, but we have an even greater freedom that was also purchased with blood and preserved through sacrifice: our freedom from sin and our freedom from its consequences. It's not just the freedom of being punished for your sins, but it's the freedom from them. With a proper relationship with God, opening our hearts and lives to him, we can overcome our evil inclinations. We can be victorious over sin. That is our freedom. Jesus purchased that freedom with his blood, and thousands of faithful saints of the church have sacrificed to keep the memory and the knowledge that freedom allows. We may not put an end to war and killing, but we can put an end to the hatred within ourselves. That we can do by God's grace and with his help.

Perhaps today as we appropriately celebrate our national independence from tyranny, maybe we ought to mix in with that celebration a time of thanksgiving to God for the ability to be free from our sinful nature and the punishment that is due us for it. In that time of thanksgiving, perhaps we can find a way to forgive those who have sinned against us, just as we have been forgiven of our sins, to forgive those who have trespassed against us just as we have been forgiven our trespasses.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen