

Pentecost 13B
August 30, 2009
Hymns: 398 - 493 - 784 - 491

EPHESIANS 4:30 – 5:2
GET RID OF ALL BITTERNESS, RAGE, AND ANGER
***Start By Looking Inward At Your Own Sinful Nature.**
***Continue By Looking Outward To Fix Relationships.**
***Seal The Deal By Looking Upward To Christ.**

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you – and manifested through you – from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear loved and forgiven offenders of God,

(slide 1) Have you ever said something to somebody that you later regretted? A man (someone like me) got angry at the manager of his local dry cleaners once and expressed his anger quite forcefully. He realizes now that he probably did not leave the manager with a very favorable impression. He knows that because recently he put a red Uniball pen in the pocket of his white shirt and forgot to put the cap on it. It made a ghastly big red stain with a dark center at the base of the pocket. Try as she may, his poor wife couldn't wash it out. "I'll try the dry cleaners," she said. So, the good wife took the white shirt with the dark red stain on the shirt pocket to the very dry cleaner where this guy had exploded. The manager took a long, slow look at the dark red stain on the front of the shirt and then looked sideways at the man's wife and said quietly, "Good shot!"

I would say that was one customer who probably hadn't made a very favorable impression on the manager. I won't ask if any of you have ever gotten upset and said anything you should not have said. In our sermon text for the day from Ephesians, St. Paul says, **(slide 2)** *"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with Whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice."*

What does it mean "to grieve the Holy Spirit of God"? Well, the Holy Spirit is the Person of the Trinity Who brought you and me to saving faith in the cross of Christ. The Holy Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts, dwelling in us as His temple. Paul makes that point three times in his two letters to the Corinthians. We grieve the Holy Spirit when we live in a way that is discordant with the kind of person God has called us to be. This isn't "the sin against the Holy Spirit" spoken about in the Bible. That sin is complete rejection of God and His salvation. Still in all, Paul is saying we are going to want to fight harboring ill feelings that can lead to all kinds of other sins – including ultimately losing our faith, if we are not careful.

This is not to say it isn't challenging to live as a new person in Christ Jesus. Particularly when we read the list of sins Paul runs off -- about never being angry, or deceitful, or having malice in our hearts, or about never letting any corrupt words escape from our lips - even in anger at the manager of the dry cleaners. Then we know these are high expectations of the Christian – expectations you and I fail time and again to live up to. But Paul in these verses, indirectly gives us a little formula that should help.

The first part of that formula is this: (slide 3) Look inward. That is, take care of what is inside you. Consider those words again, *"Get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice."* Do you have any of those negative emotions within your heart or mind? Let's face it. There are those periods of time when we committed Christians have a great deal of anger within us. We are bitter about the way we were treated at work. We harbor malice in our hearts toward those lousy politicians. The death of Ted Kennedy reminds that politicians are human too – subject to moral frailty and needing a Savior from sin and death, just like you and me. I can't be sure about the Holy Spirit, but I know I have been grieved in my ministry by estranged marriage partners and ex-spouses who can't say enough bad or wish enough evil on one with whom they used to bed. Paul asks us to look within at any negative emotions that may dwell there. Remember: we never get completely rid of that old sinful Adam within each one of us. He frequently raises his ugly head within us – grieving the Holy Spirit, leading us to want to bring grief to some other party, and often bringing grief back upon our own head by the way we conduct ourselves.

A medical student was doing a rotation in toxicology at a poison control center. A woman called in very upset because she caught her little daughter eating ants. The medical student quickly reassured the mother that the

ants were not harmful and there would be no need to bring her daughter into the hospital. She calmed down, but then at the end of the conversation she just happened to mention that she had given her daughter some ant poison to eat in order to kill the ants. Now the medical student told this mother that she better bring her daughter into the emergency room - right way!

Anger is like ant poison. It needs to be dealt with immediately or it could cause serious damage to our soul. Some of the nicest people have a great deal of anger within them. And interestingly enough, it doesn't always show. Psychiatrists tell us that depression is often anger turned inward. Not all depression, of course. Depression may be explained by any number of things, including chemical imbalances in the body. But for some of us, depression comes from anger which has never been properly dealt with. There are some people who, when they get angry, just explode, and it is over in a short time – except for having to put back together the pieces that blow apart. But at least their personal physical health is no longer affected. There are other people, sometimes very good people, who turn their anger inward. They may not even be aware that they are angry because they have suppressed that anger for so long. And then they do not know why they are mournful and weeping all the time. They go to a counselor and the counselor says, “Who is it that you are angry at?”

Paul asks us to look inward and to examine these inner emotions that are a part of being human. For you see, our inner condition determines the way we respond to our lives. It is not so much what comes to us from the outside that determines our behavior; it is what is already on the inside. Remember Jesus' words: ***The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man “unclean.” For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man “unclean”..... (Matthew 15:18-20).*** Take care of what's inside you! All of us, if we did that, would find some things in our lives, some darkness in our hearts, that we wish were not there. So if we are to live the Christian life, we are, first of all, to look within.

But we are not to stop there. The Christian faith is not a mystical faith where we sit around and contemplate our navels. We do begin with a hard inward look, but this is only the beginning. St. Paul says take care of the things on the inside. (slide 4) **But then he advises us to - Continue by looking outward to fix relationships.** ***“Be kind and compassionate to one another,” he writes, “forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”*** You see, faith never stops with an inward look, faith always looks outward. ***“Be kind and compassionate to one another . . .”***

Now Christian faith does not consist only of kindness. Kindness is a byproduct of faith in Christ. It is a misconception when people think that Christian faith is simply people being kind to one another. Christian faith has to do with much more than that. But at least it does deal with that. A minimal expectation of Christian faith is that we treat others kindly and with tenderness and with respect. Sometimes, in this cynical day, when we are trying to be helpful, trying to be kind, we can be suspected of having ulterior motives. But we must make the effort if we are going to live the Christian life. We can not only be concerned with our inner righteousness - we must also be concerned with our outer witness, the witness of concern for other people. So St. Paul writes, ***“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”*** And so today we are challenged to look inward, and we are challenged to look outward.

But, of course, that is not the end of the pilgrimage either--we are also reminded to look upward. Notice that he says, ***“Forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”*** This is why we must forgive others, because we have been forgiven. But this is not all. He continues, ***“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”*** There is the answer to malice and bitterness and anger! There is the answer for making us kind and tenderhearted and forgiving toward one another! We are to imitate God! We are to acknowledge and to remind ourselves of the great love and kindness and mercy and forgiveness we have received from the Lord – especially in Jesus, Who prayed, “Father, forgive them” – when your sins and mine nailed Jesus to the tree!

It is not necessarily sinful to get angry. Jesus Himself got angry at times. It's how we deal with it – Is it possible to channel and control it for good?! The best way to lose your temper is to lose yourself in God. There is our hope--To lose ourselves in God. Not only to look inward and outward, but to look upward to our gracious and forgiving God in Christ. Nowhere in the Scriptures does it say that it is easy to control anger, to be forgiving and giving - but it is possible.

Some of you may have seen a remarkable film from a few years ago titled, *Dead Man Walking*. It was based on a book of the same name. It tells the true story about a man named Lloyd LeBlanc whose son had been killed by a man named Patrick Sonnier. Sonnier was executed for his crime. Afterwards LeBlanc told that he would have been content with imprisonment for Sonnier. He attended Sonnier's execution, he said, not for revenge, but hoping for an apology. Sonnier didn't disappoint him. Before sitting in the electric chair, Sonnier said, "Mr. LeBlanc, I want to ask your forgiveness for what me and Eddie done," and Lloyd LeBlanc nodded his head to signal a forgiveness he had already given. LeBlanc said that when he arrived with sheriff's deputies there in the cane field to identify his son, he knelt by his dead boy and prayed the only thing that came to his numbed mind - the Lord's Prayer. "Our Father, Who art in heaven . . ." He said that when he came to the words: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," he did not halt or equivocate. "Whoever did this, I forgive them."

But he acknowledged that it was a struggle to overcome the feelings of bitterness and revenge that welled up within him from time to time, especially as he remembered David's birthday year by year. It was like he was losing him all over again: David at 20, David at 25, David getting married, David standing at the back door with his little ones clustered around his knees, grown-up David, a man like himself, whom he will never know. Forgiveness is never going to be easy. Each day it must be prayed for and struggled for and won. There is no better way for us to forgive and accept others who have done us wrong than to remember that God has accepted us and forgiven us. The ultimate help for us in meeting the challenges of each day is not only to look inward or outward, but also to look upward.

If we are to live a Christian life, if we are to be a salt to the earth and a light to the world, we must be aware of those emotions within us that must be kept under control, we must have our eyes open to the opportunities for service and witness through kindness and tenderheartedness and forgiveness directed toward the people we meet. But we must also focus our eyes on Him Who comes to us with love, forgiveness, and mercy and grace. **(slide 5) "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Amen.**

The peace of God which passes all human understanding shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.