

## SEPTEMBER 6, 2020 – WORSHIP SERVICE

### MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Creator God, we are gathered here again this morning in this oak-draped sanctuary, soaked in the sunshine, wrapped up by the breeze, grateful for the company of one another and your Holy Spirit. We have come, as we are, eager to be renewed and refreshed by the words that we sing and hear and then take with us to use in our lives.

God of love, we offer you the prayers of our hearts. We pray for all who are close to us, family members, friends, neighbors – for whom we have concern. For those who are sick, we pray for health. We pray for Darla and her doctors this morning; give them wisdom and guidance that will help her return to full health. For those who are scared or anxious, we pray for your comfort and peace. For those who are in school, studying, teaching, supporting, coaching, cleaning, cooking, driving, planning or learning, we pray for safety and wisdom and growth. For our elders at Bethesda, Kidron-Bethel, Pine village, Asbury Park, Presbyterian Manor, for long-term care facilities here and all over this country we pray – for the residents and all who care for them, God we continue to pray for safety, perseverance, inspiration and hope. O God, we pray for farmers, those who work the earth and tend the livestock. God, we need rain. We pray for those who live in cities, whose daily rhythms and concerns may be quite different from ours and yet fear, anxiety, anger, grief... those are universal human experiences and so we pray for brothers and sisters in places near and far who are struggling to live within systems that were never intended to include or support them.

Be with us now as we continue to worship you, God. Bless our time together. Open our ears to hear your message to us. Open our eyes to see where your Spirit is leading. Open our hearts and give us passion and energy to follow you, to love you, to seek you each day. Amen.

### REFLECTION ON WRATH – 15:15-20, 27-32 – PASTOR CALEB

We've reached the last pair of a sin and virtue in our series on the seven deadly sins. Today, if nothing else, I want you to take away that you may have good reason to feel anger.

Yet for every thought or emotion that might lead us to sin, including anger, we are transformed as we become reoriented toward God's love.

In our church and beyond, we so desperately need to be rooted and established in the love of Christ, in order to find creative and wise ways to respond to the anger within ourselves and others.

#### IS ANGER SIN?

Like many of these traditional words, "wrath" is not an every day word like "anger" is. Are wrath and anger the same thing? Is it a sin to be angry?

I'll start by taking wrath to be anger on steroids. It's expressing anger by attempting to sabotage or hurt another person out of revenge.

Anger is a human emotion that we all experience, and as such it is not sinful. It is what we choose to do with it or any of our emotions that becomes a moral issue.

Jesus taught that the anger that precedes murder is already a problem.

*“But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.”* (Matt 5:22)

That might make it seem like anger is forbidden. But in context, Jesus is talking about a use of anger that results in burning bridges or sabotaging relationships. Calling someone “fool” was to speak to them with content.

Jesus makes it clear that you can’t pursue a right relationship with God by offering sacrifices apart from striving for reconciliation with others.

Another well-known passage about anger is Ephesians 4:26: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”

Here, it is striking that anger is not called a sin. It’s what you do with that anger. “Do not let the sun go down,” like the teaching of Jesus calls for us to attend to repairing the relationship as soon as possible.

#### CRUCIFIXION STORY

At any rate, the focus passage that I chose for the topic of “wrath” is part of the account of Jesus’ crucifixion.

You may be wondering how this account connects with wrath. We’ll see how the cross exemplifies human wrath at it’s worst. And the cross is also God’s transformative answer to human wrath.

We basically pick up the passion story right where we left off last week, after Pilate in his sloth fails to do Jesus justice, and instead hands him over to be crucified.

In the subsequent scenes that Mark’s Gospel describes, Pilate has Jesus severely whipped, and then a whole contingent of soldiers leads Jesus into a court area to mock him. They dress him in a purple robe and sarcastically mock him as “king of the Jews.”

It’s a mock coronation as they put a wreath of thorns on his head. Jesus is presented as the ultimate “un-king” in front of perhaps hundreds of soldiers.

The whole affair is ugly as the Jerusalem leaders were threatened and jealous of Jesus, and not only wanted him dead, but also completely discredited. Since Jesus gained recognition and following as he taught with authority and won arguments with the scribes, the threatened leaders wanted a way to seek revenge and avenge their lost honor.

A ritual such as crucifixion was designed to humiliate and lower someone’s standing in the eyes of others.

More mockery came when Jesus was nailed to the cross and people passing by insult him – *if he is the Messiah and so great, why can’t he just get himself down from the cross. If he would just do that, then we’d know and believe!*

By memorializing the cross in our faith, we can't forget that people were terribly cruel to Jesus as people have been cruel in all times and places.

This is anger gone horribly wrong. This wrath is fear converted into cruelty. The crucifixion of Jesus is an extreme example, but it shows how human wrath eventually turns murderous, even murdering the very one who revealed God's Spirit, nature, and love.

We humans are so good at getting caught in cycles of violence and revenge, yet the love of God manifest on the cross provides a way out. Jesus did not respond to his enemies with revenge, but with a willingness to break that cycle.

As Timothy Geddert writes, "Christ's death was designed to break the vicious circle, to end sacrificial deaths, to create community ready to suffer injustice rather than perpetuating violence against anyone."

The New Testament gives us a multifaceted portrait of the meaning of Jesus' death. We can't get into all of that, but among the possible portraits is a Jesus who died on the cross to save us from our own wrath if we are willing to pay attention.

Of course, the Bible talks about God's wrath too, which is another challenging subject. God's wrath has always been an aspect of God's love – never in contradiction to it, as God zealously identifies with those who are wronged, those who are oppressed, and those who suffer violence.

It's scary to let go of the need to control the outcome, punish, or get back at people. We can start to do that when we believe and trust in the power of resurrection that allows us to let go of the fear that drives our anger.

#### REASONS WE ARE ANGRY

In this season of pandemic, I know that all of us feel some anger and fear on some level or another, even though it will look a little differently for each of us.

For some it is the prospect of losing work or health coverage. If you are really in a high-risk category if you get the virus, you may feel abandoned and forgotten as we fail to control the virus, with its incredible death toll.

You may feel isolation and loneliness or frustrated at lost plans and the stress of alternative plans for school or business.

Going farther, our disagreements on politics or theology can make us angry, especially as we no longer hold to a common narrative about reality. Even the pandemic has become political, and we are faced with contradictory narratives about what in fact is actually happening.

There's a lot of anger in our country, as this past year has exposed major disparities and vulnerabilities in our society. We have violence from both the right and the left as tensions remain high from our too-evident legacy of racial injustice. There is breakdown of government and public institutions.

Meanwhile, polarization of our time is straining personal relationships when would-be friends find themselves on “opposite” sides of the issues.

All this is in addition to rupture of personal relationships in normal times, that might raise feelings of anger – conflict within our families or work, with persons you do business with or within the church.

Or anger because of financial instability, a prospect many face in the ever-volatile farm economy. Tragically, some carry deep soul-wounds from suffering physical or emotional or sexual abuse at some point in the past.

We have many reasons to be angry and afraid. I feel some of that anger. Our tendency to have someone or some group to blame, and direct your anger there.

Anger can be valid and be for good reason. Yet we do have a choice whether we use the energy of anger in ways that are constructive or destructive. We need to channel the energy of anger in ways that build community and work for a more just world.

We need to be spiritually rooted in the love of God that gives us a vision to see that people are people. Without excusing people's bad behavior, we can identify the very human fear and weakness that are behind that bad behavior, because if we are honest, each of us face parallel temptations on some level or another. The very things that infuriate us so much in others so often exist in some form within us.

For the remainder of our time, we turn to how to be spiritually rooted in the love of God, as pastor Lois comes up to lead us in another spiritual practice.

## SPIRITUAL PRACTICE – PASTOR LOIS

The spiritual practice suggested for this morning is to read scripture as a love letter – from God to us. As we move from the idea of unhealthy anger towards God’s love, we’re encouraged to focus on a couple of places where the Bible talks about God’s love for us.

As you hear these passages, let the words from God to you enter your mind and heart. Feel the deep love God has for you and become aware of God’s presence with you.

*For it was you, God, who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.*

*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made!*

*Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.*

*My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

*Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.*

*In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. Psalm 139:13-16*

*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? No, in all 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. Romans 8:31-32, 37-39*

LOVE – EPHESIANS 3:14-19 – PASTOR CALEB

This prayer from Ephesians 3 is beautiful. It is one of Beth's favorite passages, so one of my early gifts for her was ordering a wood engraving of part of it into a nice piece of walnut from a friend who does that kind of thing. Later this passage was the main scripture reading at our wedding.

We don't have to let fear or anger control our outlook on life, because the basic truth of reality is already given for us in these words. The love of Christ is wide and long and high and deep, and it surpasses knowledge.

Though the prayer in Ephesians makes no direct mention of the cross of Jesus, it makes no sense apart from the cross and the resurrection. They are not just lofty words. We begin to grasp the love of Christ because this love gave Jesus the courage to go to the cross as a third way between a fight or flight response.

And such love would be foolish and worthless if it weren't for the resurrection that reveals that the love of Christ was God's number one ingredient for making the cosmos all along. It is the "Deeper Magic" as C.S. Lewis called it in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

How does the love of God in Christ actually help us with anger, you ask?

It helps us because of the simple equation that Jesus gives multiple times in the gospels: because God forgives us, we can forgive others. Or as Jesus told Simon the Pharisee: the one who has been forgiven much, loves much.

I don't want to over-simplify this, or deny that forgiveness is a process. The deeper the wound you might carry in your soul, the harder and longer the process of forgiveness is.

Jesus is our example as his great love faced the terror of the cross. Yet we also know that we are not Jesus.

We must be careful not to pressure or shame anyone into putting themselves in harm's way or in the position of being abused as a misapplication of Jesus' willingness to suffer.

Whenever the Spirit calls a person to make a substantial personal sacrifice, that will come not from a sense of shame, or duty, but strength and love from deep in the heart. It's the type of risk-taking you see in someone like the Salvadoran bishop Oscar Romero who was assassinated while presiding over a church service, because of the ways he spoke out on behalf of the poor and victims of the country's civil war.

The basic truth remains the same: our forgiveness of others is linked to God's love and forgiveness of us.

Jesus' teaching directly addressed how to form a new kind of community of people who shared possessions freely with one another and reconciled with one another. Jesus' genius was that he knew to anchor this teaching in God's forgiveness.

God's love has always been a constant from the beginning of time, just as surely as gravity. The cross of Christ is not the first instance of God's love, but a revelation, like a watershed scientific discovery of something that was there all along, but no one quite grasped it.

God's love is like a giant stimulus package that infuses the cosmos with love that allows us to cancel the debts anyone else owes us.

#### RESPONDING TO THOSE WHO MAKE US ANGRY

We have the challenging task of learning to love the people who make us angry.

What I observe in our polarized time, is we need to first approach each person as a human being with their own fears and losses. We need transformative conversation rather than pre-drawn battle lines.

What I observe in our polarized time is the tendency to want to defeat or shame the person on the other side ("how can you possibly think that!"). This just serves to encourage each side to double-down on their own position rather than understand what they might be missing, or rather than see how you could communicate more clearly the piece of the truth that you do have without judgment.

Paul's prayer in Ephesians is a prayer for the church. It is not simply a statement, but a prayer for the church to grasp the extent of the love of Christ. We cannot grasp it on our own. The prayer is that the Spirit will give us the power to grasp the magnitude of this love.

Not as a simple band-aid or salve for the wounds we carry in our souls or the battle-lines in the culture. Rather, Paul's prayer is for us to find a ground to stand on so that we are not inwardly shaken. So that we find that inner strength from the fullness of God to use our anger well.

For it to become a kind of holy anger that like the wrath of God fiercely longs for justice for those who are most vulnerable. The energy we need to proclaim *good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted and to proclaim freedom for captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.*

Sisters and brothers, be rooted and established in the love of Christ. Let that be our response.

When you are angry or fearful or overwhelmed, may God strengthen you -- in your inner being -- with power through his Spirit, and may you remember *how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.*

#### BENEDICTION

Go with the God of love, knowing that nothing – not death nor life, angels nor rulers, things present nor things to come, powers nor height, depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate you from that love through Christ Jesus our Lord.