

The Boiling Point

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, August 30, 2009 James 1:17-27

Gary Wilke of Appleton, Wisconsin, felt more than a little frustrated with his daughter's \$2,600 computer. He had taken it back five times to the store where he purchased it. It had to have a new hard drive installed, a four-hour home visit from a computer technician and there were problems such as no sound and the inability to burn CDs. The computer still wouldn't boot up when he got it home from the shop one Friday.

When he went back Monday, he took the machine and told the staff he would take care of it. He put the computer processing unit in the foyer of the store, went to his car, got what witnesses described as a "large sledgehammer" and pummeled it. Wilke denies reports from a store employee that he used profanity. "I didn't want to cause any trouble," he said. "I wasn't there to harm anybody. I said, 'Have a good day,' and I left." Later, he was arrested for disorderly conduct. Reached afterward by reporters seeking a comment, he said, "I don't really want to make a big deal out of it, but it feels good in a way."

If you own or work on a computer, you probably find Wilke's story at least amusing, and you might even admire him a little. Uncooperative computers are a common cause of anger these days. The University of Bolton in Great Britain recently conducted a study of what they call "computer rage." Dr. John Charlton from the university reports, "In our study of 126 participants we found that the majority of people became angry [at their computers] three or four times each month, but more than 10 per cent reported anger occurring 10 times or more. One person estimated that he or she became angry with computers as much as 40 times per month." The study also found that 54 per cent of people had expressed anger in verbal aggression towards their computing equipment and 40 per cent actually engaged in physical aggression towards the computer, such as hitting the keyboard and smashing the mouse. Of course, computers aren't the only thing getting our dander up. Traffic, poor customer service, and rudeness also rank high on the list of common causes of anger. Some studies even suggest that Americans are angry more often and get angry quicker than they used to. Maybe the pace and pressures of modern life are to blame.

But anger is certainly nothing new. It is as old as the human race. Social scientists describe it as one of the seven "universal emotions" that can be read on someone's face regardless of that person's background or culture. People have always gotten angry. People everywhere still do today.

The first mention of anger in the Bible is the rage of Cain against his brother Abel – anger that led to homicide. Anger often leads to sin in scripture, but not always. Moses, for example, is often angry. Sometimes it caused him to act foolishly, but other times it seemed to provide energy and courage for him to do the right thing. And those familiar with the scriptures will know that (especially in the Old Testament) God gets angry as much as an human does.

In general, the Bible is very fair and practical about anger. It accepts that anger is part of life, and acknowledges that anger occasionally motivates people to do some things they should do. On the other hand, the Bible recognizes – and often warns us – that anger can easily get out of hand and cause us to do terrible things that we will almost certainly regret.

We heard the Bible practical approach to anger in our scripture this morning from the Letter of James. James is full of practical advice on how to live as a faithful follower of Jesus in this world, and so has been a favorite of down-to-earth Christians ever since it was first written nearly two thousand years ago. James uses plain language to tell the simple truth.

This includes the simple truth about anger. So James says, “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger.” Believe me, if you can master just those three simple instructions, you can keep yourself out of a whole lot of trouble. But let’s look closer at what he says about anger.

James doesn’t say, “Don’t ever get angry.” That would be totally unrealistic. People get angry. James simply says, “Be slow to anger.” Don’t rush into it or relish it. Approach with caution. Treat it like something explosive –because it is.

We can appreciate James’ common sense. Anger is part of life. There are even times we have every right to be angry. Sometimes we are victims of other people’s maliciousness or carelessness.

Harry Reasoner, born in Dakota City, Iowa, was one of the leading television journalists of the late 20th century. With others, he helped start the long running news series, 60 Minutes. Reasoner became especially close to Andy Rooney, who started as Reasoner’s producer and writer and later became a famous commentator on his own. When Harry Reasoner died in 1991 from cancer caused by decades of chain smoking, his old friend Andy Rooney used his 60 Minutes commentary to pay tribute to Reasoner. Included in that commentary was much praise, of

course, but Rooney also admitted anger. In reference to Harry's refusal to give up smoking, Rooney said, "Harry, you were so careless with our feelings about you."

That is just one example of anger which we may have a right to. I could give others. And I could give plenty of examples of anger that inspired people to do courageous, heroic things – especially to fight against injustice. Anger was part of the motivation for many who marched in the civil rights protests of the last century. Anger has been involved in efforts to reduce drunk driving. Anger is often the engine of reform, as when Jesus cleansed the temple.

But anger is often responsible for making things worse rather than better. Anger, especially the kind that is rushed into and relished, held and harbored, hardens the heart. It can (and often does) lead to tragedy.

One hundred and thirty years ago – before television and radio – W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan were show business royalty. The two of them created musicals for the stage that proved remarkably popular and enduring. Several are still performed today.

Originally the two men were good friends, and were doing very well together until they bought a theater. Then Sullivan decided it ought to be recarpeted. So he bought the carpet, but Gilbert intercepted the bill. When he got the bill, he was very angry and hit the ceiling. He took Sullivan to court because he felt that as long as Sullivan had ordered the carpet without consulting him, he should not have to pay for it. There was so much anger that neither one of those men spoke to the other again as long as they lived. When Sullivan wrote the music, he sent it by messenger to Gilbert. Gilbert would pen the words and send it by messenger back to Sullivan. Then, when they would have their wonderful performances, they would each come from opposite ends of the stage to take their bows, but they never looked at each other. They never said a word to each other again as long as they lived.

Of course, that is a rather mild tragedy, compared to others caused by anger. Great crimes, even human slaughter, has resulted from anger. Anger is clearly volatile, and should be handled carefully. That is what James means when he advises, "Be slow to anger."

But James gives his own reason for being slow to anger, which deserves our attention. As James explains, "Be slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God's righteousness."

“But wait!” you might say. “Didn’t we just agree that anger can be involved in motivating people to do good things? Isn’t that a case of anger creating God’s righteousness?” A careful distinction is in order, I think. Anger can help prepare for God’s righteousness, but it can’t create God’s righteousness.

Think of it this way: suppose you want to build a new home on a site already occupied by a run-down shack. Before you can build something, you have to clear the lot. That is, you have to tear down the shack. Anger may be useful in tearing down unrighteousness, but it can’t help when it comes time to build. As the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, it is love that builds up. Anger can only create an “empty lot,” so to speak. It cannot create communities in which people genuinely care for and respect each other. The civil rights movement, for example, was useful for tearing down the unjust system that existed, but we are still in the process of building up something better to take its place. We are still in the process of learning to love and respect others, so that it becomes only natural to treat them fairly. Anger won’t help us do that. Anger /can’t/ help us do that.

People sometimes make a big deal out of the fact that Jesus, apparently in anger, overturned tables and tossed out the money changers in the temple. Yet an honest reading of the gospels makes clear that this was an exceptional event, and certainly not the most important thing he ever did.

The most important thing he did was to offer himself up in love. He went to the cross to show us the depth of God’s love, and to inspire a movement – a movement that still exists and that we’re a part of two thousand years later: the church. It was through mercy and love that Jesus produced God’s righteousness and made it available to us. Jesus did not harbor anger either toward the one who betrayed him, the one who denied him, or the ones who ordered him crucified. He looked down from the cross and said, “Father, forgive them.” That willingness to forgive, to let go of anger – that is how you lay the foundation of God’s righteousness. That is how you produce something better than what exists.

Amen.