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From the Pulpit

Sermon Series ~ *The 7 Lively Virtues*
Sermon ~ *Compassion: Seeing with the Eyes of God*
The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ July 24, 2011

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Mark 3:1-6

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Well today we come to the end of our sermon series on the 7 Lively Virtues. If you've been with us lately you'll remember that this series finds its basis in the 7 deadly sins. Actually, it finds its basis in the idea that we, all of us, are spiritual people. We're not just people who go to work and school, not just those who occupy our time with pursuits both trivial and profound, we're not just those who only eat and sleep— we are also *spiritual* people. And as such we're trying to be mindful about the things that help *and hinder* our lives of faith.

Centuries ago Christian writers set themselves to reflect on the things that interfere with a vital and lively faith and they came up with this list, the 7 deadly sins: that is, 7 things that distract and deter our progress in Christian maturity. In the classical expression the list includes, pride, sloth, lust, gluttony, greed, envy and anger. But what we've been doing this summer is, rather than look at the negatives – rather than focus on the things that hinder – we've been looking at the positive. What are those things we can do that help our spirituality; that help us to grow in faith – that help us become more spiritually mature?

- So the up side, the positive spiritual exercise for pride, in which life revolves around *me*, is worship: in which life is re-centered to revolve around *God*.
- The lively virtue associated with the deadly sin of sloth – which isn't really laziness, it's becoming so discouraged with our spiritual lives that we just give up trying – the lively virtue that counteracts the sin of sloth is renewal: letting the Holy Spirit touch and transform our lives.
- The lively virtue that's the opposite of lust is love – kind of self-explanatory.
- The lively virtue that's on the positive side of gluttony is self-control: which has to do with finding our joy and fulfillment in life *not* in consuming but in our commitment to God.
- The deadly sin of greed that causes us to hold on and hold back becomes the lively virtue of generosity.
- The upside of the deadly sin of envy is service which means rather than wanting to *be* somebody else we choose instead to benefit them.

Worship, renewal, love, self-control, generosity, service and today... the lively virtue to counteract anger is compassion. Don't those sound like things that you want in your life and the lives of the people around you? Healthy spirituality, growing in faith, improving our relationship with God, strengthening our soul, enlivening our spirit – these things don't come easily; *and these things don't come naturally*. We have to work at it. And that's why we come together in Christian community: to seek God and encourage one another. That's why we read the Scriptures and pray and spend time with God: to practice and to remember and to strengthen our otherwise atrophied spiritual muscles so that we can be vigorous people of faith.

Okay, so today it's the movement from anger to compassion. People who write about anger tend to say that it's a reaction to a threat. No doubt that's true; clearly so. But I would put it a little differently. I would say that anger happens when our expectations are not met. I expected things to go a certain way, I expected specific things to happen, I expected to be treated in a particular way, I thought things would go differently... and all those experiences of unmet expectations can make me angry.

And I think there are 2 primary categories of expectations we have: one is that we expect God's creation to be respected and honored. Therefore we can become angry with ecological disaster and environmental threat; we can become angry when the poor are marginalized and the minority oppressed. We are angry when a lunatic guns down Norwegian youth at a camp. And these are *good* expressions of anger! I think these are the kind of circumstances that that Ephesians passage was referring to when it says in verse 26, "Be angry, but do not sin!"

Good anger – the Bible might call it *righteous* anger – motivates us to want to rise up and change the way things are and bring them back into line with how they ought to be – with how *God* expects them to be. When our expectations match God's then righteous anger emerges whenever those expectations are unmet. In fact, one of the problems of our society is that we don't get angry

enough over global warming or Somali famine or posturing politicians. *Be angry...* but do not sin. Which means righteous anger still needs to be rightly expressed. I think this is precisely what that Ephesians text is talking about: to be angry without sinning is to deal with and express our anger in appropriate and productive ways. It is to let our anger motivate us to right wrongs, refuse to be mistreated, bring forth justice and defend the cause of the poor.

But we can also get angry when our own *personal* expectations are unmet – you know, not necessarily the things that provoke God but just the things that bother *us*. And here we can operate out of a more selfish and self-centered perspective so that our expectations may not be reasonable or valid. And yet still, when our expectations are unmet– and to be more specific here we might say, *when we don't get what we want* – we can get angry. And in this kind of anger it's easy to sin. And in our sin of anger – whether passively through our silence and withdrawal or actively by our words and even violence – we can hurt (may even *try* to hurt) the other person. We hurt them because they did not affirm, preserve and uphold *our* view of the world in which our expectations are supposed to be fulfilled.

Some of us have been on the unfortunate receiving side of other people's anger. Some of us grew up in angry homes and it's made it difficult for us to deal with conflict in relationships or to express our anger to others and even admit it to ourselves. And some of us have been anger-mongers who have unleashed the verbal and even physical fury of our unmet expectations onto those who *should have been* the first recipients of our unconditional love.

Anger happens when my expectations are not met – when I don't get what I want: when I'm focused on me and find you a frustrating obstacle in my way – whether that's on the road and you're driving too slow in the far left lane; or at the office and you're blocking my chance for a promotion; or in my house and you are once again doing what I asked you not to do. Anger happens when I focus on me and look at what *I* want and what I need.

Compassion – the lively virtue; the opposite and positive side of anger – compassion looks at the other and does not ask what needs of mine are not being fulfilled but asks what needs of *yours* can I meet? When Jesus walks into the synagogue the religious leaders are already primed to catch him on something because he's not meeting their expectations: he's not respecting their authority; he's not following the rules.

Jesus for his part has an expectation that they will have compassion for the man with the disability but when he asks they are silent and their hearts hardened. And then – and uniquely here in this passage – it says that Jesus looked at them with anger (this is that righteous anger). But notice what Jesus does with his anger: he turns it into compassion and heals the man. Compassion is seeing other people with the eyes of God... and acting on that vision with deeds of love – channeling the anger we feel over unmet expectations into deeds of love that meet the needs of others.

The preacher James Boice related to story told to him by Watchman Nee, the great Chinese evangelist of the 1900's. It seems there was a Christian in China – a poor rice farmer whose fields were situated high up on the side of the mountain. Every day he would have to pump water up into his rice paddies to irrigate them. And every day he would discover that his neighbor down the mountain, a man who was not a Christian, had opened the dikes of the Christian's field so the water would drain into his own fields. The Christian farmer first tried to ignore it but it became too much for him and he was so angry with the man that he turned to his church community for prayer and counsel. The church prayed and came up with an idea. The next day the Christian farmer went out early in the morning and first filled his *neighbor's* fields; *then* he tended to his own. Watchman Nee tells how the neighbor eventually became a Christian all because the

community of faith helped him turn his anger into compassion. Anger thinks of self and sees things from our perspective; compassion thinks of others and acts to meet their needs. Compassion is seeing other people with the eyes of God... and acting on that vision with deeds of love

Shortly after the terrorist attack of 9/11 Mark Stroman, a violent member of the Aryan brotherhood, went on a rampage seeking to kill Muslims in Dallas. He shot 3 men killing 2 of them and critically wounding 26-year-old Rais Bhuyian with a shotgun blast to the face. Stroman was executed last Wednesday but for the past 10 years Rais Bhuyian has mounted a strong and aggressive campaign... to get Stroman *off of* death row. Bhuyian, now blind in one eye, forgave Stroman and instead of hatred and anger chose the path of compassion. Before his execution, in the Huffington Post, Stroman said of Bhuyian's efforts, "I received a message that Rais loves me and that's powerful; I want to thank him in person for his inspiring act of compassion ... If I don't make it, I want Rais to carry on his work teaching people not to be prejudiced." Compassion is seeing other people with the eyes of God... and acting on that vision with deeds of love

Friends, what are those places – *who are those people* – that make you angry? (Or I should say, “over which you *choose* to become angry?”) And what does your anger tell you about yourself and your expectations and your desire to get what you want? But even more importantly, how can you think, not of yourself, but of the other and in so doing transform your anger into compassion? Compassion is seeing other people with the eyes of God... and acting on that vision with deeds of love.