

**Proper 14B
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
Christ Church
9 August 2009**

“Don’t go to bed angry!” How many of you have been given this advice? I remember well, sitting in the parlor of the priory at Benedictine with Fr. Kieran, the monk who would preside at our wedding. He looked at me quite earnestly and said, “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger.”

At the time, knowing little about the Bible, I attributed his advice to his gift for poetic expression. I didn’t know then that he was quoting the Letter to the Ephesians, the Scripture that we read this morning from the New Testament.

Of course, I wanted so much to be a “good wife.” I took this directive quite seriously. In consequence, in the early years of our marriage, David and I stayed up many a night into the wee hours trying to resolve the typical conflicts of marriage so as not to go to bed angry. Were I to amend this advice, I’d

say, “Don’t start discussing difficult topics after eight o’clock in the evening.”

These instructions to the Ephesians about anger are attributed to Paul, but most scholars believe that the writer of Ephesians was pseudonymous – that is – written by someone else in Paul’s name, most likely someone who knew Paul and his teachings very well. This was a common practice in ancient history in contrast to the elaborate copy write laws of today. The writer is providing instructions to a fledgling community, a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, about how to get along – about how to live as people who truly know Christ.

What captured me in this portion of Ephesians though, is not the phrase, “Do not let the sun go down on your anger,” but the command that precedes it, “Be angry!” Our teachers seem to have conveniently skipped over this one. Perhaps this is a function of being raised as a southern woman – being told that anger is itself a sin. “Don’t be mad!” we hear said.

But, I have also heard men say that they dare not enter the realm of anger. They fear that if they were to express their anger, they would be unable to hold back the tide of violent impulses. I daresay that our inability to recognize and accept our anger, learning to use it creatively, is the cause of many a fissure in our common life. Whether it be in business, in home life, in the church, in local politics or in the politics of the world, misplaced and misused anger leads to disaster and sometimes, death.

Psychologists tell us that anger is a useful response to humans and other living creatures when under threat. We hear much about the fight or flight survival response, the function of our ancient reptilian brain that insures our existence. Curiously, though, anger is actually the secondary response. We become angry after we have been hurt or when we are afraid of being hurt. Anger is the signal of a deeper problem.

I have been reading “Four Spirits,” a novel written by Sena Jeter Naslund about the Civil Rights Movement of Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. One character, a black man who is a veteran of the Korean War, T.J., stands on the sidewalk watching as African American children, dressed in their Sunday best, move in unison down the street; they are part of a demonstration to achieve racial justice.

The thinking of the Movement leaders is that white folks will be moved at the sight of innocent children, all polished and beautiful walking toward freedom. Martin Luther King, Fred Shuttlesworth, and others are hoping that the children will inspire the white leaders to open their libraries, to open their restrooms, to open their lunch counters for all to enjoy the basic freedom insured by the Constitution.

But they underestimate the anger and rage that lay just below the surface of Jim Crowe laws. They do not realize that many angry white men and women, who themselves feel disenfranchised by society, who lack education, who lack

meaningful work, who lack the resources to live generously, are not about to give up what little advantage that they think is theirs. They are not about to mix it up with folks they consider the cause of their misfortunes.

The innocence of children is blasted by the power of the fire hose. Adults and children alike are tossed to the ground and battered by the force of the water. T.J. has long buried the trauma of Korea, the night he held his buddy in his arms as he was dying. But, when he sees the cruelty delivered to the children, something in him breaks. He regresses to warrior. He picks up the nearest brick and hurls it toward a policeman.

The demonstration that is supposed to be a nonviolent attempt at social change, becomes the first of many riots to erupt in the south, and within the next five years, the country will have lost three of its best leaders.

What is the solution? How can we step back from the ravages of rage? How can relationships between people at

every level from personal to civic to national accommodate anger without being destroyed by anger?

In the Letter to the Ephesians, it is written, “Be angry, but do not let the sun go down on your anger.” Don’t give the Devil a chance to wreak havoc in your personal lives and in your community. So what do we do with our anger? How do we use it to help us instead of destroy us?

Give your anger a hearing. Try to listen to what it is telling you. Ask of it, where have I been hurt that I feel this angry? What am I afraid of? Get to the undercurrent of your anger. Allow yourself to feel it – to feel the hurt – to feel the fear – to feel the anger. Be brave.

We already have a few helpful strategies – walking it off – taking twenty deep breaths before speaking – calling a friend and venting – asking a counselor’s help – confessing it to a priest or spiritual director, and, above all of these, laying anger at the feet of Christ in prayer – asking for wisdom and guidance as we move through it.

Once we are able to articulate the source of our anger, we are in a better position to talk it out with the person or people who are the source of that anger. Of course, there is risk in doing this. There is a chance that the person will not hear as we would like. There is a chance that the person will walk away. There is a chance that the person will offer a counter offensive.

But Ephesians reminds us that we are to persist in working it out, even if it means losing sleep. Our life in Christ may require that we put our own hurt on the shelf for a while. Our life in Christ may require that we listen instead and try to understand, rather than demanding to be understood.

For those who think that religion is only for the weak, they haven't read Ephesians. It takes great strength and courage to face our anger, to address it responsibly and to work tirelessly for reconciliation and peace.

“Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” When Fr. Kieran first said those words to me, I laughed to myself – he is

a monk – what does he know about being married? He may not have known about marriage, but he did know the challenges of living in community. He knew that building community like that of the Ephesians, where Jew and Gentile were seeking a way to be together in Christ was no simple matter – no easy project.

It is our life work – to learn to live in peace – to be angry and not to let the anger persist. In Christ this is possible.

Thanks be to God!