

The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany + February 24, 2019

In recent years I've become enamored with what I like to call a "spirituality of venting." Venting is another word for complaining. A spirituality of venting makes room for venting to God in times of anguish, suffering, grief, and loss.

The part of the Bible that encourages this way of praying is the Book of Psalms. Most Sundays we pray a psalm between the first and second lesson and you've likely noticed that the Psalms are diverse. There are psalms for all sorts of circumstances and conditions. Some psalms celebrate life when all is well and many psalms vent when life is in the pit. One such psalm reads "out of the depths I cry to you, O God." These are the psalms of lament or psalms of complaint. Some of them even go so far as to ask God to bash the enemy. They even go violent asking God to smite the enemy.

These psalms of lament may be cathartic – acknowledging pain or anger, bringing raw emotion before God.

I think this tradition of praying, though forgotten, is deeply engrained in the Hebrew tradition.

But Jesus comes along, the rabble-rousing rabbi, pouring new wine into new wineskins to say this:

Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Turn the other cheek.

Is Jesus contradicting this spirituality of venting? By commanding his followers to love in this way is Jesus disrupting this spirituality of venting, asking us to do be doormats, pretending to put on the pious façade.

I don't think so.

We need not cover up our anger. Nor should we fail to name the injustices around us. And venting is a good thing and a necessary step toward forgiveness and healing and restoration.

I think this is what Jesus is saying: you cannot make a home in your anger. We cannot dwell there. We cannot operate from that vantage point. Anger is natural and important. Venting is good for the soul but even those psalms of lament do not dwell there. The venting is just the first step toward finally releasing our feelings to God. Anger leads to love and forgiveness and healing. The process takes time. It isn't instantaneous. But the healing God offers leads to the radical love he describes.

We could love only those who love us or folks we like, but what good is that? Why anyone can do that? Even atheists do that.

The kingdoms bent in violence seek retaliation and revenge. The core values of the Kingdom of God are forgiveness and love and generosity. Dwelling in anger or getting stuck there is not life-giving, but anger channeled into another way may lead to fullness of life.

The other day I heard a great piece on the radio program "All Things Considered" about Martin Luther King, Jr. The radio piece described Dr. King's relationship with anger, especially during the Civil Rights movement.

When he was in high school King was riding a bus back from an oratory contest that he had won. When some white passengers got on the bus, the driver ordered young Martin Luther King and his teacher to give up their seats. Though he wanted to remain seated, he and his teacher were forced to stand in the aisle for the 90 miles back to Atlanta.

King often said that the night would never leave his memory and it was the angriest he had ever been. One of the things he learned over time was that hate was too great a burden to bear. Carrying hate is corrosive and erosive. It didn't mean he didn't wrestle with anger and express it to those closest to him, but he learned that it could be channeled into a force for change, telling those in the civil rights movement that the only weapon they could use was the weapon of protest. It was to be a movement of non-violent resistance. In that way they would be following Jesus.

This whole non-violent creed was tested when someone once threw dynamite at King's house. He heard the news and then rushed home to find a crowd of supporters. Some of them had weapons. They were ready for a fight. Everyone was poised, it seemed, for a riot.

Dr. King stood calmly on the front porch and asked everyone to go home and then spoke about Jesus' admonition to love your enemies. Someone called it a noble moment. He said that expressing and acting upon their fierce anger was utterly contrary to the way of Jesus.

That very night he lay awake thinking that his wife and baby could have been killed by the blast. In reflecting on it later he said "I could feel the anger rising."

But in the interest of the cause he said he could not allow himself to become bitter and to operate from a place of hatred. Dr. King truly believed in the power of God's redemptive love.

If you only have anger and dwell there you will be paralyzed. Dr. King spoke often of channeling it into constructive channels.

I wonder sometimes if love of enemy might not be one of the church's most critical ways of witnessing to the way of Jesus, first bringing our anger out into the open with one another (and especially to God), but ultimately handing it over to God and asking God to channel it into something redemptive and loving and life-giving.

Some even go so far as to say the enemy may be a gift.

CPE (clinical pastoral education) is a requirement for folks in seminary and it usually means spending three months in a chaplaincy setting. I did my CPE at St. Joseph's Hospital in Tacoma. There's more to CPE than visiting patients. It is also involves a good deal of work with peers and a supervisor to address issues of personal growth.

The group was quite aware that I was nursing a grudge big time. I was always complaining about a fellow. Let's call him Jack. It's one thing to vent and it's quite another to never let something go. I complained bitterly about Jack because he was rigid and uncompromising. There wasn't a lot of grey area for him, and because of it he didn't make life very easy for those he influenced. Well, one day my supervisor in our one-on-one session had the courage to say, "You know, you're just like Jack." Then he shared his observations how at times my behavior was just like the guy about whom I was complaining. In that instant my enemy was a gift because I could see that those who really annoy us usually reveal something about ourselves.

Today's teaching from Jesus is part of his Sermon on the Plain. In last week's Gospel, Jesus began his sermon on the plain, and Pastor Van Kley reminded us that by preaching to everyone on the plain Jesus was demonstrating something very critical about the ways of God and the in-breaking of God's kingdom. Everyone, you see, is on the same ground. Jesus has come to us where we live and where we are, and loves us all the same because we are all on the same level. The thing about hills and mountains is that when you occupy a place above others you want to dominate others. Judging others and condemning others is a way to exercise control. From such a vantage point we enjoy having enemies and may even need enemies.

But notice what Jesus does and see that all your neighbors, those you like and don't like those who are friends and strangers, those you hold dear and those you deem enemies, seem them all on the level plain.

See the way God sees and love the way Jesus loves.

Can we really do this?

No, we can't but God never tires of breathing the power of forgiveness into us and upon us and thanks be to God for stirring up within us the gifts of the Spirit to live and dwell in the things of God.

In moments you are invited by Christ to come and gather around this table to share in the gifts of God. It is a level place. Like a plain where are loved the same and enjoy the same gifts where we catch God's eternal vision of a world redeemed, reconciled and made new! Amen.