

Pentecost 12 August 11, 2024

In the late 1980s I worked as an associate community organizer with East Brooklyn Congregations, an organization of about 40 congregations affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (which is very similar to our own Vermont Interfaith Action). There was a pastor there who was just incredible, Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood, who had come to East New York Brooklyn from New Orleans about 20 before and took over a dying church and turned St. Paul's community Baptist Church into one of the most dynamic and progressive houses of worship in the entire city. A *New York Times* writer, Sam Friedman, was intrigued and got to know Rev. Youngblood and eventually wrote a book about his ministry, *Upon this Rock*. One of the stories Friedman tells is the first encounter between Rev. Youngblood and some of the organizers from the Industrial Areas Foundation who were invited into the neighborhood by a Catholic priest and began to reach out to other churches and congregations. At first, Rev. Youngblood was suspicious, suspicious that these white guys would just see him as another angry Black man. But as he went on to say, no these guys thought anger was good, it motivated people to change. Rev. Youngblood was impressed, He went on to look up the etymology of anger, and found out that it entered English from an old Norse word for "grief, especially sorrow at a loss." Rev. Youngblood realized that yes, this was the source of his anger, the loss experienced by the African American community, enslaved and held in bondage for centuries, and then even with the end of slavery the discrimination, second class Jim Crow citizenship and the outright hatred that was experienced, a deep grief, a painful loss, deep enough to make him angry and want to do something about it to change.

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, this morning we hear of your forgiveness and love, and may this forgiveness and love take root in our lives. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

I start with that story about Rev. Youngblood, because that is where the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians begins as well: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger." I have said before that I appreciate this passage, because it is put as an imperative, a command: Be angry. Now throughout Christian tradition, beginning around the fifth century, there were lists of sins, and some were seen as so wicked as to be "cardinal sins," and anger was included in this list. We, of course, are taught that anger is not a positive thing, and that it is wrong to get angry. But frankly, as I think all of us here know, telling someone not to be angry is like standing on the beach and telling the tide not to come in! Absolutely

useless, and just plain ain't going to work. But this morning, we are told to be angry, be angry yet with two very important caveats: do not sin and do not hold on to that anger. Now, I believe this is an important and deep insight into our lives, especially our spiritual lives: as Rev. Youngblood discovered, there is a reason for our anger, the grief and loss we have undergone, loss for what we had in the past and grief for what has been taken from us. Although I'm not a social psychologist, I imagine that a great deal of the deep anger we see so often now in our world; the loss of industrial jobs, due to technological change and trade policies, and communities then ravaged by addictions and the opioid crisis, families shattered and worst, it seems like no one is paying any attention to the deep pain. Of course anger and resentment run deep. But as we hear in Ephesians today, do not sin and do not hold on to that anger. One of the organizers I met from the Industrial Areas Foundation was Ernesto Cortez, a winner of the MacArthur "genius" award. Once I heard him talking about Lord Acton's famous dictum, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," and Ernie Cortez turned it on its head and said, "Yes, but powerless corrupts and absolute powerlessness corrupts absolutely." He could just come up with brilliant quips like that. Ernie wrote about "Cold Anger," that is taking the hot anger we feel, such as Rev. Youngblood felt, and using that energy, yes even that power, to change things. As I recently heard the Vice President put this very well: energize, mobilize and organize. I hear a precursor of this sentiment in the Letter to the Ephesians; that our anger is not to lash out, but to do the honest labor, yes the hard work to change conditions, so that there is something to share with the needy, and maybe even to find the ways to eliminate the need in the first place.

But the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians does not stop there: I believe we are called to an even deeper place. There is another imperative, another command that is just as important as those reflections on anger, but perhaps even more difficult to embody: we are told, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another." Wow, as difficult as it is to be angry without falling into sin and without holding on to that anger, being kind, tenderhearted, forgiving, that might just be asking too much! And of course, yes, it is too much, too much for us to accomplish on our own. But yes, just as importantly, we are not doing this on our own: we are able to forgive, able to be kind and tenderhearted because as the scripture says we do this, "as God in Christ has forgiven you." Yes, we have been given this deep forgiveness, yes God in Christ Jesus has showered us in that kindness and tenderheartedness. That, that my friends is what makes

this possible, what makes all the difference in our lives: God has so kindly, so tenderheartedly, reached out to us in forgiveness and love. Once we know that, once we open our souls to this power, to the tender and kind power of God's mercy and love, this is all the difference. And what we have been given is even so much more when we give it away. That's the insane logic of Jesus, but it is the very basis of our lives: what is given to us is so much more as we follow in Jesus' way, becoming those imitators of God, living in love, giving up ourselves for one another, this is how we become kind, become tenderhearted and become forgiving: this is God's loving way for you and me. So my friends: be kind, be kind as Jesus is kind to you, be tenderhearted as Jesus opens his tender heart to you, and forgive, forgive as Christ has forgiven you. I think that it is one of Jesus' closest followers, the mystic St. Francis, who expressed this sentiment in the most poetic way, as the conclusion of the prayer attributed to Francis says, "For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life." Amen.