

We continue this morning through the Purgation cycle of our series on the seven deadly sins. Today we are discussing wrath or anger. Our goal for this cycle is to become more aware of our sins and understand them better, so that we may avoid committing them, and by God's grace we may purge them from our lives.

The second cycle is called Illumination. Recall that in the early church, baptism was often referred to as Illumination, for natural man needed to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit in order to understand himself, God, and the path to union with God. During the cycle of Illumination, therefore, we bring the new life that we have in Christ to bear upon our sins. We desire to find the virtues that we should adopt in order to displace the root of sin from our lives. As St. Paul states in 2 Corinthians 10, "Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." Importantly, all of this self-examination should be done while diligently asking the Holy Spirit to illuminate our inner life.

And finally the third cycle is Union. In this stage, we desire to be completely focused upon God in whom we have a perfection of faith to help us resist the attacks of the devil and to finally release us from the effects of sin. This stage has an eschatological sense to it, for in desiring God, we have learned to long for our final release from the bands of sin. We therefore turn our focus to the life in the world to come, the completed redemption of our bodies and souls. Purgation, Illumination, Union. This is the ancient path to godliness upon which we travel this Trinity season.

Anger, the subject of today, is also known as wrath. Think about your experiences. When do you become angry? Usually we get angry when our expectations are thwarted. Perhaps we made a request of someone and the request was ignored. Parents are particularly familiar with this scenario. We made a plan to do something, but our plan was displaced by someone or something else. Perhaps it rained on our parade. Perhaps we see true injustice, the innocent being robbed or injured. We all believe the world should be a particular way, and when our vision of how things *should be* is ruined by how they *are*, then we get angry. We blame other people, or life, or God, as unfair.

Last week we talked about Acedia, a dejection resulting from either failure or success, and an accompanying hopelessness so that we give up trying. Wrath does not stem from failed plans, or from plans that succeeded in which we find no lasting pleasure. Wrath stems from interrupted plans, from frustration which leads us to be angry at someone or something. Wrath is directed toward an object that we desire to destroy, bringing vengeance for being wronged and removing the frustrating person or condition. Anger seeks to harm. Men,

especially boys, typically act out physically. Women and girls may target their rivals more through hurtful and biting words.

It is important to note that not all anger is sinful. We know this because Jesus Himself became angry with the religious leaders of His day on multiple occasions. Recall what happened immediately after Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. From Matthew 21 verses 12 and 13 we read, "And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves." In a similar account in John's Gospel, we read that Jesus made a scourge of cords to drive the profiteers out. Jesus loved always, but love disciplines disobedience. It does not countenance rebellion or abuse. Verse 14 then resumes the narrative with, "And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them." So Christ was angry with those who caused harm and cast them out, but then He brought healing to those who were sick and infirm. Righteous anger bring restoration and wholeness. Incidentally, this is our goal for this season, that we would cast out the sins in our lives and make room for Christ to bring wholeness and healing.

Another occasion in which the scriptures relate that Christ showed anger is in the 3rd chapter of the Gospel according to St. Mark. "And he entered again into the synagogue; and there was a man there which had a withered hand. And they watched him, whether he would heal him on the sabbath day; that they might accuse him. And he saith unto the man which had the withered hand, Stand forth. And he saith unto them, Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill? But they held their peace. And when he had looked round about on them *with anger, being grieved* for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other."

Christ here displays a righteous anger which prompts Him to heal and restore; it was not the unchecked emotional reactivity which destroys. Luke's version of the healing of the man with the withered hand does not mention Christ's anger, but rather focuses on the response of the Pharisees in the wake of this healing. Luke 6:11 says, "And they were filled with madness; and communed one with another what they might do to Jesus." In this verse, the anger of the scribes and the Pharisees is described as madness, insanity. The rational part of the human is set aside and the charged-up emotions run the show. Is this not the same impulse that caused Cain to murder Abel? This is what we must guard ourselves against.

Turning to the Old Testament reading this morning from Isaiah 57, we see that God is also

described as being angry with His People, Israel, for their idolatry, their sin.

For I will not contend forever, Nor will I always be angry;
For the spirit would fail before Me, And the souls *which* I have made.
For the iniquity of his covetousness I was angry and struck him;
I hid and was angry, And he went on backsliding in the way of his heart.
I have seen his ways, and will heal him;
I will also lead him, And restore comforts to him And to his mourners.

Of course, here again we do not see this anger leading to the annihilation of the Hebrews. Rather it reflects a punishment of the people with an eye toward healing and restoration. God does not have emotional passions like we humans have. He rather is the purest love, that which gives of itself and desires union with us, His creatures, to whom He gave His own image. His anger is that separation of Himself from us, which leads us to repentance and finally to our reunion with Him. This is the sense of verse that we just read, "I hid and was angry." God's anger removes Him from us, to leave us to our own devices, and therefore to our own destruction. But all this is so that we would repent and return to God from our self-imposed exile.

Jesus can be angry without sin. God can be angry without sin. But can we, redeemed followers of Jesus Christ, be angry without sin? Ephesians 4:26-27 states, "Be ye angry and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: neither give place to the Devil." St. Paul implies that we too can follow the model of anger that Christ set. Righteous anger should not be characterized by a desire to hurt another, and therefore the believer must fight that natural, visceral, emotional reaction to lash out. Yet when we see injustice and lying that hurts the innocent, when we see unchecked evil in this world, a rational response that addresses wrong is justified, and even commended. Righteous anger heals and restores, sinful anger destroys.

We should also not justify our sinful lashing out as somehow being righteous anger. We sinful humans do desire to make excuses for our sins. It is better to pray and work to bring the emotions under control than to fool ourselves into indulging anger. It is easy to rationalize away sin, but it is still sin, driving us from God, and of which we need to repent. That emotional response of anger indicates that we sense something is amiss. We should then take time to analyze why our wrath is aroused, to evaluate if we have perceived the events correctly and if a true injustice has occurred, and to determine if we are called to bring about restoration. This generally takes time. The reactions of the moment are often sinful, for we have likely not considered our response with the care that is required.

Finally this morning, let us turn our attention to the Gospel lesson from St. Matthew. We read a portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount which begins in chapter 5 with the Beatitudes. Immediately before our reading begins, Jesus just finishes proclaiming that He was the fulfillment of the Law, the Torah, and that the Law is not abolished by Him, but that it still defines God's standard of holiness. Our reading begins at verse 20. "Jesus said unto his disciples, Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." What do we make of this statement? The Pharisees were known for their meticulous attention and obedience to the Torah, even tithing tiny amounts of spices. So in one light, Christ's statement could be very discouraging, for the burden of this obedience would be great. Jesus never says that we no longer need to be as concerned with the law, but His emphasis is different: the heart of man. Jesus then discusses some of the Ten Commandments as examples of what He means.

The first commandment He addresses is the sixth, "Thou shalt not kill." This command is expanded in Exodus 21:12, which says, "He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death." But Jesus says, "that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment." We see Jesus moving from external compliance to the attitudes of the heart, and what he says should give us pause. If the judgment for murder is death, and unjustified anger is subject to the same judgment, then anger is punishable by execution. Now, of course, Jesus is using hyperbole to stress the seriousness of his statement for this is generally not a fitting temporal punishment. But from an eternal perspective, all sin leads us to condemnation by God. Our righteousness is to exceed that of the Pharisees. Therefore we must avoid unjustified anger.

Christ continues with this line of thought by ratcheting up the offenses and the punishment. The word *Raca* is not clearly understood, but it is thought to be similar to calling someone stupid. This offense is considered worse than mere anger. The simple judgment from the Torah would be insufficient. Such an offense merits being brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish legal council. And if one angrily calls a person a fool, then this most grievous offense merits being thrown into the smoldering trash heap called Gehenna. Condemnation to the smoldering fires of hell is the punishment for unjustifiably condemning a brother in this manner.

Notice here the overlap of earthly and heavenly implications. What is hyperbolic in time, may be literal in eternity. Anger desires to strike out at someone. Murder is the completion of the angry heart's desire. It is nothing with which to trifle. It is nothing to indulge. We like to be angry. It asserts the self over those who dare offend us. Rather than condemn them, our anger condemns ourselves, and as such, it is imperative that we humble ourselves to

make amends to those whom we have offended through unjustified anger.

Christ makes this abundantly clear in the last verses of our reading. For those making sacrifice at the temple, if they remember that they have offended someone, Jesus tells them to leave their sacrifice in the temple and go ask forgiveness of the person before asking forgiveness of God in worship. We are not to let such offenses fester in time. We are encouraged – no, Christ uses stronger language than that – we are to be urgent in making things right with those we've wronged. Looking at the end of the gospel reading, again it seems odd that an angry outburst would land someone in prison, but Christ is talking about coming before the heavenly judge. We will one day stand before Christ to give an account of our sins, including our angry outbursts.

This portion of scripture has traditionally been applied to our Eucharistic worship. When we come to the table of the Lord, we should come with clean consciences, not consciences burdened by sin, let alone the sin of anger. Holy Communion is the sacrament of unity of the Body of Christ, so for us to approach the table in disunity is to undermine the grace to be found there.

In addition to making sure that we are in peace with the brethren, in the canon of the mass, we pray, “and here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee, that we, and all others who shall be partakers of this Holy Communion, may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ.” Therefore, for us to come to the table in an unworthy manner, having unconfessed sin, is not only an offense against the Church, but it is also a presentation of a blemished sacrifice, and unworthy sacrifice to God.

I admonish you therefore, that you not come to the table having been angry with another person without having attempted to make things right. Do this prior to gathering for worship. Unburden your consciences, so that when you make your confession to Almighty God, that the Absolution will be a true pronouncement of forgiveness, so that our sins will be remembered by God no more, and so that our souls will truly be healed in Jesus Christ.

God grant us grace so that we would understand our anger and recognize our heightened emotions before saying or doing hurtful things. There are earthly consequences for our lack of self-control, and there are likewise heavenly consequences as well. Putting aside the frustrations that bring us to anger, let us rather embrace the path that God has for us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.