Anger Management

Read Matthew 5:21-26

I may be in serious trouble. I blame it on Henry Ford. If the automobile had never been invented and then mass produced on the scale it is, maybe I wouldn’t be dangling on the precipice of judgment. I’d be riding the train perhaps, or maybe even a horse, who knows. Or simply walking.

So, just this week I was mulling over this passage from Matthew 5. I’ve discovered that the people who say how great the Sermon on the Mount is probably haven’t read it, or if they have they’ve not applied it to their own life. We have all these creative ways to admire it as an unattainable ideal, or as beautiful words that reach so high morally that no one feels compelled to apply them to real life. That’s the danger I face all the time. As a teaching elder in the church I have to wrestle with these texts long enough so that they end up ensnaring me in their demands.

So as I said, I was mulling them over as I drove down route 70 when someone cut me off, then someone else pulled out in front of me, then someone else was creeping along in the left lane (one of my real pet peeves). I don’t lay on the horn or speed up to tailgate them and I don’t weave around them and slow down to a crawl. I don’t pull up to them at the next light and roll down my window and yell at them. I don’t do hand gestures because I don’t want to get shot or be the victim of vehicular homicide, plus I never know if the person might know that the man driving the flaming blue Durango having a fit of road rage is in fact a preacher who claims to love Jesus. No, rather, I just call them names in the comfort of my own vehicle: Moron! Creep! Jerk! Dope! Sometimes I even harbor brief fantasies of following them home and when they get out try to frighten them and give them a piece of my mind. But I’m not a frightening person and I might end up being the one who gets hurt. Plus who has time for that. After all, I’m a man in a hurry!

Besides, I hear Paul in Philippians saying, “We have the mind of Christ.” Somehow the picture of Jesus following someone home in order to vent his rage, I don’t know, it just doesn’t fit, though when I come to think about it, that is the image of God some people have. So I tell myself my ranting is a harmless way for me to let off steam as I navigate through this daily thundering horde of Henry Ford’s lemmings, who scurry hither and yon going who knows where? Besides if I repress all that hostility I might give myself a heart attack.

There was an old hippie anthem, Goodbye and Hello, by the late Tim Buckley who died of a drug overdose at way too young an age. One of the verses says, “The velocity addicts explode on the highways, ignoring the journey and moving too fast; petrified by tradition, in a nightmare they stagger, into nowhere at all, and look up aghast. And I wave goodbye to America, and smile hello to a rose.” You may have heard the expression that we ought to stop and smell the roses. If you are a hippie, you also smile at them. They might be watching. I don’t like to think of myself as a velocity addict, but I may be.

Mark and I are writing a grant request for our walk next year of the Camino and thinking about, well, what we are going to be thinking about as we walk and pray for 500 miles and forty days. He came up with the idea of reflecting upon what it means to walk in the age of the automobile. How have our rapid transportation and its power served to harm our community and even our church congregations. The faster we can go, the faster we do go. The further we can reach, the more tightly we become stretched. How far and how fast can we go until important fibers of the fabric of our lives begin to fray and snap? Does all that pressure produce our propensity to begin to live angry lives? Is it becoming ever more difficult for us to be together as God’s people in gentleness, patience and grace? And how angry must we become before we stop seeing those all around us in the rat race as rats, not as precious people for whom Christ also lived and died, and as people that are dealing with the same stress and tension that we are experiencing?

The Bible has lots of good stuff to say about anger. Here’s a little sample:

Proverbs 12:16 says: “The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent man ignores an insult.” Have you ever been vexed by a fool? Have you ever fired back a fiery rejoinder to try to get even or just to shut them up?

Or two verses later, Proverbs 12:18 says, “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” Is your tongue a sword to deliver words that stab or do you use your words to heal hurts, even when you are the injured one?

Proverbs 19:11 says: Good sense makes a man slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.” Have you discovered the glory of overlooking an offense, or are you still fixated on revenge?

Or Proverbs 20:3: “It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife; but every fool will be quarreling.”

Lest you think it is just the Old Testament that speaks on this, consider Romans 12:18: “If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.” Or Ephesians 4:26-27: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.” Anyone who has been married for a while knows about the wisdom of this verse first hand. When you let the sun go down on your anger, the anger cools down to a slow burning ember, but the marriage bed becomes cold, as cold as the shoulder you’ll get the next morning until the coals are either dowsed by reconciliation and forgiveness, or buried to be kept alive until the next fight breaks out. Are you laboring under the illusion that your anger is innocent, or have you learned how to identify your own sin? And have you discovered how the devil uses your anger as an opportunity to torment you and break valuable relationships?

Paul gives further counsel a few verses later in 31-32: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

And one more from James the brother of our Lord: James 1:19-20: “Know this my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God.”

There are many more verses but you get the picture.

So to get back to my trouble due to inner vehicular road rage and name calling of my fellow human beings who annoy me. I fear I may be flirting with judgment from God who in no way approves of my name calling of his beloved creatures, even if it is done in the privacy of my own SUV.

I found a little mercy in the Sermon on the Mount in the Greek language of all places. Let me explain. Jesus opened the sermon with the beatitudes: blessed are the poor, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the peacemakers and the persecuted and so on. Then he came to these ethical sayings in which he did not negate the Law so beloved by his people, but he began to pull them deeper than even the law demanded. So the law said, “Thou shalt not kill,” but Jesus took it deeper: “But I say to you, everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire.” Uh oh!

Greek to the rescue! The verb form for being angry here is a present participle. What a relief! The present participle means that the anger is something that endures through time. We call it holding a grudge or nursing it. It means that we have decided consciously not to forgive nor to seek reconciliation but rather to carry our hurt and our animosity right along with us. We carve out a little niche in our souls and we feed the beast of our anger and resentment. But it is not a tame beast. It begins to want to be taken out for a walk into your life. I causes you to follow offending motorists home and starting a full blown confrontation. It leaves your mind and causes bad behavior.

You begin to be harsher, more emotionally brittle, more intolerant of the failings of others, in other words, graceless and judgmental. What you harbor in your secret place begins to get acted out in public, in your relationships, in your church family, in your biological family, in your community of the human family. As it says in Hebrews, roots of bitterness spring up, cause trouble, and thereby many become defiled.

Is it any wonder that this begets the wrath of God? Just this week I read the best explanation and reason for the wrath of God I’ve ever come across in Dale Bruner’s commentary on Matthew. He writes, “Jesus teaches everywhere that serious ethical instruction should be undergirded by serious warnings. The holiness of God is at war with all bitterness, hatred, and hurting. And where divine holiness collides with our hostility the crash is called the wrath of God. God’s wrath is God’s war of love against everything gratuitously hurtful. God’s love would not be love if it did not work to remove all that ungraciously hurts. The wrath of God does not disprove; it proves the love of God.” ( P.213) How marvelously clear he makes a very unpopular doctrine. It is unpopular because for most people, they cannot conceive of wrath apart from the fits of ungodly anger they have experienced from one sinful human being or another. Unlike our wrath, God’s anger is always redemptive! Wrath is God’s response to abuse in all its forms.

They say you can’t take it with you when you die, but imagine arriving in heaven with a big load of unforgiven sins for which Christ died! His response would probably be something like, “What are you bringing that garbage into my throne room for. I already covered those sins with my own blood.” If you are like me, you don’t want to come before the heavenly bar with the junk of unforgiveness hanging around your neck like a great stone. So let it go. We’ve all been warned. We harbor the acids of our bitterness to our own detriment and peril. And if you are like me, it’s not just inconsiderate or aggressive drivers that fuel your anger. Most of the torment comes from much closer in, in our families and friendships and our church fellowship. We all make many mistakes. We all transgress. We’re all in trouble. As one scholar so rightly put it, the ethical demands in this portion of Jesus famous sermon send us running back to its beginning to find mercy and forgiveness in the beatitudes. Are you struggling with forgiveness? Blessed are the poor in Spirit, those who mourn, and those who are hungry. Come to Jesus to receive grace. Then go out once again and give it away.