

Tongue Tied  
Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale  
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Ephesians 4:25-5:2  
James 3:1-12

Frederick Buechner, a modern theologian, wrote about anger saying, "Of the 7 deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you." (Wishful Thinking Transformed by Thorns, p. 117.)

In short, anger is delicious... until we realize the cost.

Anger can be consuming. It can eat alive our humanity, our wholeness and dignity. It consumes our very souls if we let it. It leaves a wounded, scarred self. And it keeps us from being able to exercise compassion and love.

Now, I want to be clear that today I am not talking about the kind of anger that arises at injustice, a righteous anger or anger that leads to action and change. Today I am talking about personal anger, the anger that comes into our lives on a daily basis. The kind that James writes about this morning, that comes out as spite spitting off our tongues.

I periodically attend a knitting group. A month or so ago one member of the group, Mary, had just come back from a knitting workshop at which she had mistakenly left a small bag. It had taken her a few days to realize this but when she did she called the workshop leader to ask about her bag. He was surprised. They had been trying to track down the owner of the bag and had called several members of the workshop. One woman, who had flown in from Arizona, said, yes, it was her bag, so the workshop facilitator had just that morning shipped it to Phoenix.

Mary was flabbergasted. Why would the woman say the bag was hers? She couldn't have been mistaken-- it was a unique bag, hand sewn, with personalized details. It had been described in detail over the phone. At this point Mary was angry. Why would this woman lie? What was wrong with her? We then all went around the table talking about how horrible this Arizona woman was. "No morals. Such nerve. What a thief."

Until one quieter member of our group asked aloud what if the woman has a medical condition that makes her memory uncertain. What if she has Alzheimer's, a traumatic brain injury, short term memory loss, or was jet lagged from her trip home, or had a personal loss in the family that week.... so many possibilities other than theft...

And in the face of those other possibilities, what happened to our anger? It receded like the tide, and compassion flowed in. Our tongues were bridled.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, has a wonderful book called Anger.

He equates anger with suffering. When someone says or does something that makes us angry we suffer. We tend to say or do something back to make the other suffer, with the hope that we

will suffer less. But when you make the other suffer, they will try to find relief by making you suffer more. The result is an escalation of suffering on both sides.

And that costs.

Anger burns. But what do we do about it? He says if your house is on fire, the most urgent thing to do is to go back and try to put out the fire not to run after the person you believe to be the arsonist. If you run after them, your house will burn down while you are chasing them.

Or sometimes our house is on fire and we pile on the tinder. We get in small groups and complain to our friends, stoking our anger. We seethe behind each other's backs and the flames soar up. It happens at church too. We whisper about each other out in the parking lot. Or over email between Sundays. Pretty soon not only our house is on fire but the whole church might go up in smoke.

So what do we do about anger? I am not saying we should never be angry. Christians have been told that to anger is to sin. That is not true. Paul states it very clearly in his letter to the Ephesians.

"Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil."

It is not anger that is the sin; it is holding on to our anger, not attending to our anger.

We can't ignore it. We can't pretend it away. We can't stuff it away somewhere for it will fester and smolder and soon our inner house will be on fire. We have to attend to anger.

We can be angry says Paul. Anger does have a place in our life. But we should not sin. We cannot hold on to anger. We cannot exact revenge for our anger. We cannot hurt another with our anger. We cannot divide the body of Christ with our anger. We cannot spew angry words to others. We cannot stay angry. We can't use anger as a weapon.

The Buddha said that a man has the right to be angry, but not for more than one night. Paul gives us an even shorter timeline. Don't go to bed angry. That might make for some nights of insomnia for us.

Dealing with anger is work. Hard work. Paul knows this. He says first we must speak truth to our neighbors. One of the temptations of anger is to let it seethe inside us, roiling around. As one writer quipped. Some folks' favorite recipe is stew.

But Jesus taught us that if when we come to the altar we find we have a problem with our brother or sister, that we should leave the offering there and go find that one and speak with them privately. If that does not work, we should take another person with us to witness to that person. If that does not work, we should talk with them in the assembly. And if that finally does not work, they can be to us like a tax collector. Which, in that Jesus includes the tax collectors within the circle of love and compassion, means we still must act in right relationship.

There is no room for griping about another person in the parking lot, or calling up every member of our family to complain or sending nasty email notes out into the ether.

No, to live a Christian life is to deal upfront with our anger. To take aside our neighbor, our brother, our church family member, our parent and say, I am angry. To name it and claim it.

But, in that conversation we don't get to vent out everything. Naming our anger does not mean a shouting match or spewing venom all over. Paul continues:

"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice."

To share our anger in a faithful way means to do it calmly, with a clear head, with no desire to hurt or for vengeance but rather for understanding. To not cause more suffering. This is hard.

Pat Cook tells of two businessmen who were roommates in college, meeting at a convention with their wives. The men, reliving the days of happy go lucky youth, sat in the hotel lobby and before they knew it most of the night had slipped away. They knew they would be in trouble and the next day they happened to see each other.

"What did your wife think?" said one.

"When I walked in the door my wife got historical."

"Don't you mean hysterical?"

"No, historical. She told me everything I ever did wrong. She got historical on me."

(sermonillustrations.com)

Ah, yes, getting historical. I am guilty of that myself.

As part of the interim process this past year we spent a lot of time as a church thinking historically. We looked honestly at patterns of conflict at Pilgrim, and the ways in which different groups of people got angry and left. We looked at how we deal with conflict in the church, and how we speak to one another when we are angry and when others are angry in our midst.

We practiced using a talking circle to mediate conflict around when to have the Christmas pageant--and found a different way of being together in conflict, but not in opposition, not in ugliness. We tamed our tongues a bit as each person got their turn.

We practiced listening and being in disagreement in other places too, in FNA and Council meetings. In discussions with the Pilgrim Nursery School, and in listening to each other's conflicting ideas about what each other wants in a settled pastor.

Both James and Paul were quite experienced with church life. And in many ways church life hasn't changed much over time. There was infighting and gossip and anger in the early church of James and Paul. We struggle with hurtful words and actions too.

But both James and Paul believed that if we put God first, if we see our neighbor as ourself, if we seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God as we thought about last week, we can use our tongues in more loving ways. To not get historical. Or hysterical. But to first seek God, and then speak trusting God to help the words coming off our tongues.

When I work with couples in premarital counseling I often offer suggestions of ways to communicate. One tool is for when they are really angry. The first person speaks for three minutes. The other person has to listen. And, when the first person is done, repeat back what the first person says. Then they switch roles until they have talked out the issue.

The key is what the listener is doing. They are listening, really listening, to what the other has to say, not biding their time waiting for their chance to talk. Not stacking up their own arguments and fueling their own anger. They are truly listening. Thich Naht Hanh calls this compassionate

listening. I listen to you because you are suffering. I listen not to blame or judge but because I want you to suffer less, and I want to suffer less as well. To allow in compassion.

Compassion cools anger, for if I feel compassion toward you it is very hard to stay angry with you. As we said last week, if I try to understand why you said the hurtful thing you said, rather than whip something nasty right back at you, there is a path forward in love rather than a forest fire burning both our houses down.

One doesn't hurt others by the bitten back words they don't say.

To close:

Winston Churchill exemplified integrity and respect in the face of opposition. During his last year in office, he attended an official ceremony. Several rows behind him two gentlemen began whispering.

"That's Winston Churchill."

"They say he is getting senile."

"They say he should step aside and leave the running of the nation to more dynamic and capable men."

When the ceremony was over, Churchill turned to the men and said, "Gentlemen, they also say he is deaf!" Most of the times it is good to stay deaf and not speak.

We can be angry. To be angry is not a sin. But don't let the sun go down on your anger. Don't let the fuel of your anger let your tongue loose to set your house, your church, on fire.

For any of us here who are angry about something, I wish you a good night's sleep. That means you have about.....12 hours to get your anger taken care of....

May God be with us in this and all endeavors.

Amen.