

SERMON: Slow to Anger
TEXT: James 1:17-27

8-29-21

Onze. Doze. Treze. Catorze. Quinze. No, this is not a Gregorian chant. This was my mom whenever she was trying to be SLOW TO ANGER. She had gone back to college after divorcing my dad, and she was required to take a foreign language. The only one that fit with her schedule was Portuguese, and it frustrated her to no end. But she put it to good use by practicing her numbers as a way to avoid losing her temper. I always thought she was counting to ten, as that was the advice she gave us kids: “count to ten before you say something you’ll regret.” Turns out, she was actually counting eleven through twenty. As I recall, she barely passed that course.

Though she may not have learned that foreign language very well, her lesson for me was quite memorable!

I think we are all painfully aware that there’s a great deal of anger in our country and in our world right now. Some experts blame social media for this, because when we’re not interacting face-to-face it feels safer, easier to scream obscenities from your keyboard. But we also know that strangers are yelling at clerks and waitresses and other customers in restaurants and grocery stores about

wearing masks or not wearing masks. Just last week, hundreds of people showed up at the County Health Board meeting, and I'm told that all of them were angry and yelling about issues that were not even on the agenda for that meeting.

We are angry about politics and fake news, hypocrisy and conspiracy theories. We have demonized those who believe differently. We spend more time and effort dividing ourselves than trying to find common ground. We call those other people idiots, and we question their compassion and their Christianity. And we have lost friends and family members. And every day it seems, we turn on the news and find even more to be angry about.

It seems as though the pendulum has swung from a time when anger was considered bad, and we should never express it to the opposite extreme of believing that anger is acceptable at all times and in all places - the louder the better.

And then we open the Bible and turn to the letter of James to read: "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness."

The objective of James in writing this letter, according to one of my Bibles, is “to assist the churches to whom he writes to live well, that is, to work out their faith in good deeds and holy habits.”

I read a beautiful story recently about a 13-year-old girl who rode the bus to school. One day, when the bus stopped near her home, she got off and was crying. Her mother, who was there to meet her, asked her what happened. The girl explained that the bus driver had yelled at her for sitting improperly in her seat. She had been on her knees and braiding the hair of her friend on the seat next to her. The bus driver not only yelled at her to sit on her bottom, but she kept on yelling about what would happen in a crash, and then about what a stupid girl she was, that she must not have a brain in her head.

After the girl and her mother got home, her mother asked her how she wanted to respond. Mom suggested that they should consider why the bus driver was so angry, that they should realize that her anger may have come from having a bad day or feeling stressed about a difficult situation in her family. The girl’s mother suggested that perhaps a kind gesture was called for. The girl agreed, and helped her mother make a batch of cookies that afternoon. The next day on the school bus, the girl gave some cookies to her bus driver. The bus driver was

humbled and apologetic about her behavior, saying that no one had ever shown her such kindness.

Of course, we all can imagine that a similar kindness might be met with suspicion or greater anger over being shamed. Nevertheless, the mother and daughter were “doers of the word” that day, being “not hearers who forget, but doers who act.” They took time to consider their options, and in the end they chose compassion over retaliation.

As one Biblical scholar wrote, “James does not deny the importance or strength of anger. He does not tell us to *swallow* or *stuff* it. Rather, he encourages us to transform anger into a virtue. Be quick to listen, he says, and slow to speak and (therefore) slow to anger. This is hard work, especially for those of us who are quick to judge, impatient with ourselves and with others, especially when we are in disagreement or have already made up our minds. To resist such impatience requires discipline.” (Archie Smith, Jr., *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4)

It takes discipline to be a faithful disciple of Christ. I’m embarrassed to admit that it took me far too long to realize that those words are related. Discipline and disciple. Following his imperative that we be SLOW TO ANGER, James

writes, “Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.”

To have the word of God implanted in us takes discipline. It takes focus. It takes practice. It takes reading and hearing God’s word at least on a weekly basis. It takes hearing, then prayer, then doing. “Be doers of the word,” James wrote.

Some of you will remember that Sunday a month ago or so, when we read the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, and each of us got a plastic bag to take home and fill with something that would make a miracle. Something that would feed or serve others. That had not been a part of my sermon until the last minute. It wasn’t my plan, it just came to me - a gift from the Holy Spirit. And it warmed my heart to have several responses from both Westminster and First Pres come back to me the following week. And it occurs to me now, that we demonstrated what it is to be doers of the word.

We came in to worship. We heard or read the story from God’s word. Then we went out and did God’s word. We acted it out. We didn’t just pray “Thy will be done,” we did God’s will in response to God’s word.

What I hear James telling us is that there has to be a connection between what happens inside these walls and how we follow-up outside these walls. Inside, we are focused on hearing and learning God's word. Outside, we need to be doers of God's word. We need to practice what we preach. We need to put words into actions. We don't just hand out Bibles; we *show people* what scripture says.

I'm thinking about doing more of this in the coming weeks. Deliberately and intentionally connecting Sunday's lesson with an action that we can practice during the week.

As today's passage concludes, "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

To "bridle our tongues" takes practice and discipline. To learn how to really listen to one another, to not only hear their words but to understand their feelings. Let us discipline ourselves not just to hear the word, letting it go in one ear and out the other, but to *become* the word. To fill empty words with meaningful actions. Let us discipline ourselves not just to come to church, but to BE the church. Let us

discipline ourselves to transform our anger into a virtue. Let us discipline ourselves to be SLOW TO ANGER.

To the glory of God! AMEN.