

Over the past few weeks we have been reading through the New Testament letter called Ephesians. This letter was written by Paul or a close associate of his. It was written to a community in the port city of Ephesus.

Last week we learned about how we are invited to affirm one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. We heard that God gives away many gifts and the importance of welcoming people with diverse gifts and opinions into our faith communities.

Before the text we will be reading this morning, Paul invites his listeners into a new way of life. A life marked by righteousness and holiness. This leads us into this text which we are about to read beginning at the end of chapter 4.

Read Ephesians 4:25-5:2

As many of you know, I served as a commissioner to the most recent General Assembly of our Presbyterian Church USA denomination. We met in St. Louis where 580 delegates and then about 175 advisory delegates made decisions for our denomination.

Each commissioner is randomly assigned to a committee prior to our arrival. When I received my assignment, I will admit that I was less than enthused. I was assigned to the Environmental Concerns Committee.

I thought that this would be a committee which would only be dealing with easy overtures in which we would approve statements with very little impact. I did not realize at the time that our committee would be assigned what would become the most controversial issue before the assembly this year.

Among many overtures we dealt with was an overture concerning divestment of Fossil Fuel Companies. The particular overture would direct our denomination to no longer buy stocks and bonds in companies related to Fossil Fuels.

Our committee of 56 listened to various voices who advocated the pros and cons of the overture. All of us on the committee agreed that climate change is real and is having a devastating impact upon the planet entrusted to our care.

We all agreed that corporate greed and overconsumption were major factors in climate change. Our committee members disagreed, however, on the best course of action concerning how to best influence corporations to make positive change concerning environmental policy.

We debated the issue in our committee. It is hard to debate an issue with 56 people. We were seated as a 3-sided square with an inner circle and an outer circle. I was in a corner on the inner circle and behind me sat Winston. I was told by my oldest daughter, Rebecca, that Winston would be on my committee.

Winston attends the same church in Charlottesville, VA that Rebecca attends. Winston and my daughter Rebecca went on a mission trip together a few months ago to the border region of Agua Prieta, Mexico and Douglass, AZ. Some here may know that I went to that same ministry 30 years ago.

Winston and I were not of one mind on the issue of divestment. In fact, we were both leaders in advocating for our opposing viewpoints. We agreed on everything else on our committee basically but when it came to the issue of divestment of so called Fossil Fuel companies we disagreed.

Many times, we Christians focus on what separates us rather than on what unites us. After debating the issue in our committee and on the floor of the assembly, it came time to gather in worship and to share communion.

As I walked to the front of the assembly hall to receive communion, I ended up walking past Winston. Before I could say or do anything, Winston extended his arms and gave me a huge hug. He knew that what unites us is so much stronger than what divides us. He chose to express love toward me rather than anger.

Paul gives guidance to the Ephesians to not let the sun go down on your anger. He also advises to not let evil talk come from our mouths but only words that build up.

We all know that these are difficult challenges. Every one of us has allowed our anger to get the best of us. Anger in itself is not bad. In our reading, Paul says to be angry but do not sin.

Anger can drive us to make positive change. For instance, we should be angry at injustice. We should be angry when someone or a group of people are taken advantage of. We should be angry when we see an animal abused.

But it is what we do with our anger than can lead to terrible consequences. See if you can relate to this person or you know the person who writes:

“Help! I have a temper. I say bitter things and make accusations that I come to regret. My wife says I embarrass her. In truth, I embarrass myself. What can I do?”

In response, this person received some of the following advice which I think can be helpful to us and coincides with what Paul reflects upon. The consultant listening to this person’s anger responded with the following advice:

“I began studying angry emotions in 1976, when I was a first-year graduate student in psychology at Stanford. Here was my idea for a study: I would find a way to make people angry in a lab setting, and then test different strategies for calming them. Sounds simple, right?”

Here’s how I planned to make them angry. I’d invite pre-med and pre-law students in for “free coaching sessions” to help them pass the standardized admissions tests they had to take. Then, while they were drilling for the test, I’d interrupt them, disrupt their concentration, and bother them.

At the end, I'd give them feedback that they didn't have what it takes to succeed as a doctor or lawyer. I shared my idea with my advisor and he said, "Good luck getting that through the human subjects committee."

I met with the committee, explained my plan, and they agreed to let me proceed—but with one change: I had to get informed consent from each participant in advance. In other words, I had to tell them up front that the purpose of the experiment was to make them angry.

Here is what I learned: Knowing up front that someone is going to try to make you angry inoculates you from getting angry. No matter how I mistreated my subjects, all I could do was amuse them.

If you can anticipate that a situation might make you angry, you can prepare for it. Decide in advance how you will handle your emotions and actions.

This consultant says that "Emotions are like a rollercoaster. Once you're on board, riding your rage, it's hard to get off. It's a whole lot easier if you can find a way to avoid getting on in the first place."

Paul in our reading says to be angry but do not sin. We must develop the capacity to step back and see what is causing us to become angry. We must become aware of the triggers that set us off. Some are real, but some are our overreactions. The more we can anticipate our triggers, the more we can prepare positive reactions and avoid blowing up.

So, if we can identify what makes us react a certain way then we can prepare ourselves to handle it. We can learn to channel our anger in productive ways rather than destructive ways. Learning this ability is hard and it takes practice.

Be angry but do not sin. Paul continues by giving guidance to put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and slander and malice.

Paul says to instead be kind to one another. Tenderhearted. Forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven us.

Paul continues by saying that we are called to be imitators of God. To live in love as Christ loved us.

It is possible to show this love and channel our anger in positive ways.

We pray for strength and wisdom that God shows us how to use anger for good rather than for evil. AMEN.

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-Maxfield, David, Vitalsmarts, Vol. 16, Issue 32, e-newsletter

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