

Speaking in Tongues

James 3:1-12

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I've been thinking about anger a lot lately. Above all as a parent. At least 75% of parenting is about anger management – and not so much my kid's as my own. But anger seems to be in the news a lot as well: the arrest in July of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates in his own home. Police arrested him because they say he was angry and out of control, but Gates is a short man, not much taller than me, with Harry Potter glasses and grey hair, and he walks with a cane. I don't see how such a nerdy old guy could appear angry and threatening enough to warrant arrest in his own home. Except he's also black, which raises a number of questions: was he really so angry? Or was he perceived as angry because he's black? Is an angry black man scarier than an angry white man? Well, it depends on who you're asking.

We've seen plenty of angry white men in the news lately as well. Those town hall meetings over health care reform, where people have gotten pretty ugly in their anger. Or closer to home, how about the fuss over CPS Energy's plan to open a nuclear plant? That could get really ugly, too. Everyone seems to be angry these days, to the point where Representative Joe Wilson broke with centuries of decorum and heckled the president during his speech to Congress Wednesday night, shocking even members of his own party. He quickly apologized, but already anger on both sides of the aisle seems to be on the rise over the incident.

I thought of all this as I read James's letter this week: "Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person.... Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing." He's not specifically talking about anger in this passage, but what he says certainly applies to words spoken in anger.

About a year ago, I preached a sermon series on the seven deadly sins, one of which is anger. The book I read on the subject said anger is unequivocally bad, definitely a deadly sin. I was not fully convinced of that at the time, but I'm starting to come around to that view. This is still a work in progress in my brain, and if any of you have different thoughts, I'd love to hear them, but this is where I'm at right now.

Above all it is my experience as a parent that has convinced me of the pointlessness of anger, not to mention the evil of it. If Sam does something I don't like, I can absolutely guarantee you that if I respond in anger, I only make the situation worse. Nothing good *ever* comes from me responding to Sam in anger. Or to get away from the parenting image, let's use another example: dealing with people who have Alzheimer's. Is there *ever* a time when getting angry at someone with Alzheimer's is helpful? No. I'm not saying we don't get angry. There's a lot to make us angry in such a situation. It's understandable. But does it ever do any good? Can any good whatsoever come from getting angry at a person with Alzheimer's? No. Never.

It's easy to see it in that situation. They can't help it, we say. We might justify our anger at children, though, by saying they need to see we're displeased and need to learn limits and consequences. Or we justify it with adults because they ought to know better, right? They're supposedly rational, supposedly capable of self-control. So if they make us angry, they deserve our wrath, right?

But I ask you: who here likes to be yelled at? Who likes to be called names or insulted? Who likes to be scolded? We can take correction, we can listen to a differing opinion, we can engage in debate – provided that it’s not done in anger. But if somebody gets angry at us – I ask you, has a lick of good ever come from it? No. When someone gets angry, our defenses automatically go up. More than that, we’ll probably go on the attack, respond with anger of our own, and then a bad situation just gets that much worse. Anger builds on itself, like a spark setting a forest on fire. I think that’s exactly what is happening in our society right now, and I have to confess it’s starting to scare me.

Now, feelings of anger are understandable. We can sympathize with a person’s anger – but only if we somehow see ourselves as being on the same side, in the same boat. And that should be a huge tip-off, that anger on the part of people we agree with is understandable, but anger on the part of anyone we disagree with is unjustified, irrational, dangerous. (That, by the way, is exactly what I think happened with Professor Gates and Sergeant Crowley.) Again, the feeling of anger is understandable, but that’s no excuse. Anger is the burning desire to pay back pain. It always wills harm. No good will ever come from it.

And this is the point where James’s letter is so very, very helpful. Even though he’s not talking about anger specifically, his whole letter can be applied to the task of controlling our anger. I’m always saying the Bible isn’t an instruction manual, but James’s letter is about as close to it as the Bible gets. Martin Luther didn’t care for James because he thought it preached salvation by works instead of faith. But I think he misreads the letter. I think James is saying that if you do have faith, then it will find expression in your deeds. Faith that does not bear good fruit is not really faith at all. Of course, that can still be a rather intimidating order. For me as a parent who knows that anger does no good, yet I still struggle to control my temper. But the good news is that what is impossible for humans is not impossible for God.

In the third chapter, James talks about the ways in which we do harm to one another, and we do it primarily through words. Seriously, when was the last time you got in a fist fight? Even at the raucous town hall meetings, I don’t know of a single incident where people came to blows. No, we express anger mainly through words, and that’s why James makes such a huge deal about bridling the tongue. He points out the irony: with the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My friends, this should not be.

Later he asks what causes fights and quarrels among us. This guy was a psychologist 1800 years before Freud. Your fights, your anger, come from the desires that battle within you, he says. You want something but you don’t get it. And ain’t that the blessed truth? I want Sam to get dressed *right now!* The health care brouhaha – I don’t understand the details of the arguments because all people are doing is yelling, but the irony is everyone wants the same thing: good affordable health care. Professor Gates and Sergeant Crowley also wanted the same thing: respect. Ironic, isn’t it? How often we get angry when we all want the same thing? James observes: you kill and covet, you quarrel and fight, but you cannot have what you want. You do not have, he says, because you do not ask God. Whoa! There’s an idea! Are we asking the wrong people for what we want? Interesting! But James goes deeper. When you do ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. If we really think about that, we’ll be horrified to realize just how right he really is. Then we might just have to confess how doggone selfish our anger truly is.

Very relevant to today’s public discourse, he goes on to talk about slander. Whoever speaks against others or judges them sits in judgment on the law. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge. Who are you to judge your neighbor? Elsewhere he says, “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.” This is really interesting, a strange way to put it. But think about it: how often when we pass judgment on others are we really doing it for their

benefit? We kid ourselves, but if we're honest, we pass judgment on others to show how righteous we are. How good, how wise, how faithful we are. But James sees right through our act and calls us on it. "Who is wise and understanding among you?" he asks. Show it by your good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it – which is what judging others amounts to – or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. Sounds like what we see on the news, right? Or more scarily, what we see in our own lives.

Instead, James says, the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure: then peace-loving, considerate, submissive (oh, we don't like that one, do we!) full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Do we think anything good can come from our anger and our judgment? James reminds us that "peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness." That is why, as he says elsewhere, mercy triumphs over judgment.

James does an amazing job of analyzing the problem, and the truth is painful, even damning. But how do we curb our anger? Even James laments that no one can tame the tongue. Well, that's not entirely true. What is impossible for us is not impossible for God, and James also offers ways that we can come to grips with our anger, mainly by reframing it and redirecting us from what we think is the cause of our anger. Here is where the faith that Martin Luther treasures becomes so important, because none of this is possible without faith.

What is it that we think makes us angry? It's all these trials and troubles and stresses that we have to suffer. One darn thing after another! There is no relief! But James invites us to see things differently. "Consider it pure joy, my friends, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault." That last bit is particularly important, because if we have to somehow earn God's help, then we're all in trouble!

You may recall that the heavenly virtue which corresponds to the deadly sin of anger is patience. That is what James is talking about here: patience, but also the stick-to-itiveness that we call perseverance. Let us see our trials as an opportunity to practice patience and perseverance so that we can mature. We can finally grow up!

James then dismisses another one of our excuses, that God is somehow behind our troubles. When tempted, he says, "You should not say, 'God is tempting me.' God cannot be tempted, nor does God tempt anyone. Rather we are tempted by our own evil desires." This is so insightful, and it goes back to what he says about our fights coming from the fact that we want something we don't have. It's easy to project this stuff onto God, but often that's just a thin excuse for the fact that we really blame God for our anger, for our thwarted desires. Remember that if we ask but don't receive, it's because we have the wrong motives. No, James says, every good and perfect gift is from God above. God does not send us misfortune or trouble. If we've got bad stuff in our lives, we need to look closer to home for the source. And as we've seen, that source is not in other people either. It's in our own hearts.

So it is that James goes on to say, "My friends, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for human anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." Our anger is never going to accomplish anything good.