
The Way of Anger or the Way of Love

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder
Proper 8 – Year C

It's possible you heard today's Gospel and wondered if perhaps Jesus woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Sometimes I read this passage and think he sounds a little grumpy.

Someone says, "I'll follow you wherever you go!"

And Jesus responds, "Foxes... birds... you don't know what you're talking about."

Another says, "Let me go and bury my father."

And Jesus responds, "Let the dead bury their own dead."

Bah, humbug.

But this week I noticed something different about Jesus' response. This week I hear Jesus speaking the truth in love. And that's not a new concept—plenty of people have said the same about this passage before. Nor is it a cop-out... I'm not trying to sugarcoat the Gospel. Jesus clearly isn't sugarcoating anything. He is naming the truth that being a Jesus-follower can be uncomfortable and hard and inconvenient.

Let's back up to the beginning of this passage when the Samaritans deny hospitality to Jesus and his disciples. James and John ask if Jesus wants them to call down fire onto the city. "Burn it down!" they say. Well, that escalated quickly. It's easy to wonder, what were they thinking? What a dramatic, over-the-top, unnecessary suggestion.

And yet...

And yet I hear the same thing expressed again and again in our own day, mostly figuratively... mostly... but the sentiment is the same.

Some want to burn down the patriarchy. Some want to burn down marriage equality. Some want to burn down vestiges of the confederacy. Some want to burn down a woman's right to care for her body. Some want to burn down the police. Some want to burn down democracy.

We have become an angry people. And our anger is enslaving us.

Paul says to the Galatians—Jesus has set us free! Stand firm, and don't submit to slavery again! Except—except through love be slaves to one another. Love one another. Serve one another. Care for one another. Honor one another. That is the only yoke we should ever submit to.

Paul says to live by the Spirit, not the flesh. And he describes the fruits of both. Friends, reading about the works of the flesh can be pretty discouraging: idolatry, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy... and that's not even the whole list! But it's certainly an accurate description of the headlines every day. It's certainly an accurate description of the state of our world, our country, our city, and sometimes our church.

We have become an angry people. And our anger is enslaving us.

Now let me clear—there is just cause for anger. If you feel anger today, you are not alone. But we cannot

allow ourselves to be slaves to anger if we want to right the wrongs of this world. We cannot be defined by our anger if we hope to protect the dignity of every human person. We must instead be defined by our uncompromising belief that loving our neighbor is more than a cute concept—that loving our neighbor has real implications—that loving our neighbor can change the world. We bring our anger and our lament before God because we believe there is a way forward with God.

The crazy thing about faith in a resurrected Jesus is that we actually believe God can redeem even the worst of things.

Jesus calls us to something different. Jesus sets us free. But free is not synonymous with easy.

Jesus is clear to his would-be followers: the kingdom of God is not the kingdom of this world. It is decidedly different. It is a good and joyful thing! YES! But is it not what we are used to, not what we've grown accustomed to, not what we are comfortable with, not what we were expecting, not an easy answer.

James and John get upset with the Samaritans and suggest total annihilation as a solution. Burn it down!

It's easier to obliterate the opposition than stay in relationship with it. It's easier to demonize the people we disagree with, reducing them to the issues they champion. But in reducing others, we reduce ourselves. When we see Jesus in the face of our friend and neighbor and stranger and the person we disagree with—the kingdom of God expands. When we deny the truth that all are created in the image of God—the very image of God!—we deny the kingdom's presence and growth and fullness in this world.

So Jesus rebukes them. Because burning it down only tightens the shackles of anger on our hearts. We become slaves to our anger.

Following Jesus is not easy. There will always be a reason to go another way, or a reason to delay. And as the text illustrates today, some of those reasons may be honorable and good. But when we choose Jesus, when we choose the way of Jesus over the way of the world, when we do the hard work of staying in relationship and coming together and finding a way together—when we allow ourselves to become slaves to one another through love—then we will know the fruits of the Spirit. Then we will know love, and joy, and peace. Then we will know patience, kindness, and generosity. Then we will know faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Following Jesus can be hard—but not as hard as living under the yoke of anger that has been foisted upon us by people who make themselves God or deny God's existence.

My prayer for us is that we would take Jesus' words to heart and be emboldened by them—not discouraged. That we would see the hard work that Jesus calls us to do, and not shy away from it. Thank you, Jesus, for naming how hard this might be. Thanks for loving us enough to tell us the truth. Because burning it down may be easier, but the fruits of the Spirit are worth staying in relationship for. May we do the hard work of coming together for the sake of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The kingdom of God is near.

Amen.