

“Before the Sun Goes Down”
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
11th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Our text for this morning is about two things:
Anger...and forgiveness.

Before I begin the sermon, I need to do something.
I've got some anger in my heart at this moment.
Not at you, don't worry.

But it's there, and I'm afraid it might get in the way of my sermon if I keep it in my heart, so I'm just going to take it out right and put it right here. I'm going to make a comfortable seat for it on the bench next to the pulpit, so that I can pick it up when I'm done with the sermon, and it won't get in the way.

In fact, before we begin this sermon, let me invite you to do something.

Let me invite you to get in your mind's eye something that maybe you're angry about right now, or someone who is under your skin.

Can you do that?

Just find...whatever anger or frustration may be camping out in your mind and heart at this moment, and I want you to take it out of your heart and place it in the pew next to you, so that it's sitting there...you can pick it up later, but just set it next to you for the moment, so that it's not a distraction during the sermon.

On the one hand, our sermon today will be about anger, because Paul addresses the topic in our text for today:

“Be angry, but do not sin;” he writes to the church in Ephesus.

On the other hand, it’s also about forgiveness.

“...be kind to one another,” Paul writes, “tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

**Now before we really begin the sermon this morning,
I’d like you to listen to a story.**

It’s a story about Jim Lawson.

Jim Lawson, some of you may recall, was an activist in the Civil Rights movement.

He was a Freedom Rider.

He learned about Ghandi’s non-violent strategies for creating social change, and he helped organize the sit-ins in Nashville, Tennessee in the early 1960s.

During that time in Nashville, Jim Lawson was a student in the divinity school at Vanderbilt University. The chancellor at Vanderbilt at that time was a man by the name of Harvie Branscomb.

Now Dr. Branscomb was a very successful administrator for Vanderbilt.

During his time at the university, the number of full-time faculty doubled, faculty salaries almost tripled, the annual budget increased more than 400%, and the University’s endowment grew by \$50 million dollars.

Very successful chancellor.

But in the early 1960s, Harvey Branscomb made a mistake. When Dr. Branscomb saw Jim Lawson's activities as a leader of the sit-ins in Nashville, peacefully protesting segregation in Nashville, he had Jim Lawson expelled from the divinity school.

Well, over the course of time, Vanderbilt changed its tune.
And so did Harvie Branscomb.

In the mid-1990's, the Rev. Dr. Jim Lawson was invited back to Vanderbilt to receive the divinity school's Distinguished Alumnus Award.

And do you know who was there, who wanted to be there to greet Jim Lawson?

Harvie Branscomb.

Harvie Branscomb was over 100 years old at the time...but he was taken up to the place where Lawson received the honor, and he shook Jim Lawson's hand, and he was heard to say to Jim Lawson at that moment, "Rev. Lawson, do you forgive me?"

And Jim Lawson replied, "I've already forgiven you."

Now word has it that a faculty member, who saw this act of forgiveness, who was there and saw the exchange between Jim Lawson and Harvie Branscomb—this faculty member said, a little louder than he should have said it:

"It's not that simple."¹

¹ There are two sources for this story. The primary source is a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock, "Looking Around During the Prayer," preached at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. Craddock was a classmate of Jim Lawson's at Vanderbilt. Some of the information on Dr. Harvie Branscomb comes from "Harvie Branscomb, a Shaper of Vanderbilt U., Dies at 103," by William H. Honan, in *The New York Times*, August 1, 1998.

What do you think?
Is it that simple?
I'm not talking now about Jim Lawson and Vanderbilt.
I'm talking about the anger that maybe you brought to the
sanctuary with you today.

When the anger is not in the pew, when it's in your heart, how simple is it to say, "I forgive you?"

Forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you?

If you've read your Harbinger cover for today, there's a reference to a wonderful scene in the tv series Ted Lasso. True confession, it's the first time I've been preempted by one of you...I was going to use that scene in today's sermon, but Brandon beat me to the punch!

Totally fine.
It's a wonderful example.

Because the truth of the matter is that I often find myself closer to what that faculty member at Vanderbilt said than what Ted Lasso said.

It's not that simple.
Letting go of anger, forgiving someone who wounded you, it's not a natural thing or a simple thing, especially when whatever you're angry about has altered the course of your life.

Anne Lamott once remarked that forgiveness "is giving up the hope of having a different past."

It's a good definition.
But not always easy to put into practice.

So before we really dive into the sermon this morning, let me invite you to listen to another story. It comes from one of my favorite theologians, Miroslav Wolf.

Wolf is a professor of theology at Yale Divinity School. He's a Croatian and also a Christian. One of the defining moments of his life and faith came when Wolf was too young to remember what happened.

But he heard about it from his parents.

It was a story that was at the core of who his family was.

Growing up in the former Yugoslavia, the year was 1957, and one day, Miroslav, who was one year old at the time—

and his brother Daniel, who was five at the time—

were being watched by their beloved nanny, Aunt Milica.

Daniel had gotten out of Milica's sight, and slipped through the gate of the courtyard to go play with some soldiers.

The soldiers welcomed the distraction of an energetic and friendly five-year-old boy. One of them put Daniel on a horse drawn bread wagon with him.

As they were passing through a gate on a bumpy cobblestone road, Daniel leaned sideways and stuck his head outside the wagon....and there was a terrible accident at the gate.

Daniel died on the way to the hospital.

How does a parent handle an event like that?

Is there a RIGHT way to respond to something like that?

Miroslav Wolf's parents believed that there was.

Even though the emotional cost was staggering, they refused to blame their nanny. It took 47 years for Miroslav Wolf to realize that his

parents never expressed ANY bitterness about Aunt Milica in his presence.

But the other person who most certainly was to blame for the accident was the soldier. The soldier who played with Daniel in the wagon, the soldier who was careless with Daniel in the wagon.

In the courtroom following the accident, Wolf's father insisted that he and his wife would not press charges against that soldier. And in fact, after the soldier went home free and unpunished, Wolf's father traveled two days to visit him.

Why did his father go to visit the soldier?

Because this soldier was so despondent about what had happened that he had to be hospitalized, and Wolf's dad went to check on that soldier in the hospital, to talk to him about God's love and to remind him that all was forgiven.²

How did he do it?

I don't know how Wolf's father did it.

Because what's REALLY complicated about our text for today is not only the command to forgive. It's the TIMELINE.

“Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...”

Do not let the sun go down on your anger?
This strikes me as next to impossible.

² Miroslav Wolf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005.

Because not all anger is the same.

I remember, after George Floyd was killed last summer, I heard the theologian Willie James Jennings, who teaches at Yale and was a beloved professor and dean at Duke—Jennings spoke about how he felt.

Jennings, who is African-American, said, “I have had so many dear friends, really dear friends...call me or text me or email me this week with their condolences, each in their own way saying to me, I can't imagine what you are feeling right now.

To which he replied: “Yes, you can. My anger is shareable.”³

Jennings did not mean anger that would lead to violence.

He did not mean anger that would lead to hate.

He was speaking of righteous anger,

as a response to injustice,

anger that comes as an expression of love,

anger that helps create change for a more faithful world.

Do any of us really think that the Civil Rights Movement could have happened if there had been no anger about the evil of Jim Crow in our society?

All of which is an invitation to look at our own anger—you may not be angry right now, but the next time you are, look at that anger carefully...is it righteous anger? Is it self-centered anger? Is it wounded anger?

³ As heard in an interview with Miroslav Volf on the podcast “For the Life of the World,” found at <https://for-the-life-of-the-world-yale-center-for-faith-culture.simplecast.com/episodes/my-anger-gods-righteous-indignation>.

You know, I keep telling you that we're going to get to the sermon this morning, the sermon on anger and forgiveness...

But here I am seven pages later and I guess we're already into this sermon...and the truth is, I don't feel like I have any easy answers to give you.

Maybe that's what I meant when I said we'll get to the sermon in a moment. I wanted this sermon to consist of some brilliant answer for how to deal with anger, how to approach forgiveness, some formula you could put in your pocket before you leave today.

But I don't have any formulas for you this morning.
What I do have is a question.

What's at stake?

When it comes to anger and forgiveness and the way we live today's text in our lives of faith, what's at stake?

Let me get at the question this way.

Did anyone here read comic books as a kid?
Anyone still read comic books?
Do you know the history of how superheroes in comic books came to be?

Back in the 1930's,
in the midst of the Great Depression,
with WWII looming on the horizon,
Americans were hungry for some kind of diversion,
some avenue for HOPE.

It was at this time that two young guys from Cleveland, Ohio named Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster did something—something for

which there has been eternal gratitude among many children and adults ever since.

What did they do?

They created the comic book hero SUPERMAN.

Superman was powerful,
Superman was pure-hearted,
Superman fought for truth, justice, and the American way...

Early Superman stories had our hero rescuing immigrants from a burning tenement, confronting corrupt politicians, and even taking on Adolf Hitler.

The concept was a hit!

Readers lined up at newsstands, waiting to see what villain Superman might vanquish next.

Other superheroes appeared shortly thereafter—Captain America, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel—during a grim time in the 20th century, these figures represented the Golden Age of comic books.

But time passed, and like all Golden Ages, this one also came to end.

WWII was over, readership dropped.

Increasingly, the world was seen as a more complicated place than the world that Siegel and Shuster first described. It wasn't neat and tidy, with good people over here, and the bad guys over there.

The comic book industry was beset with a challenge:
How do we attract new fans?

Enter Stan Lee.

In the early 1960s, an upstart company named Marvel Comics asked Stan Lee to create a new set of heroes for a new generation. In response, Lee did something risky...he TOSSSED ASIDE the blueprint, and unlike valiant Superman, Lee's characters were IMPERFECT.

They had flaws, insecurities...

In 1962, Lee introduced Bruce Banner, a brilliant scientist with a quiet demeanor, but underneath lay...a monster.

When Bruce Banner got angry, what happened?
He became the INCREDIBLE HULK!
Hulk...SMASH!

Sales shot back up.
The Hulk...was a hit!

And he represented a different age for comic books—the silver age—a time when the heroes, in their desire to do good, sometimes also **made a mess of things.**⁴

That doesn't feel too far from you and me and our relationship with this text...

We all know that anger can really make a mess of things...but it also does no good to just keep it all bottled up inside, because that can make a mess of things too.

So what's at stake when it comes to anger and forgiveness?
Not just the messes we sometimes make.

⁴ For this history of superheroes in comic books, I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, "Bow to the Troll," preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, on September 27, 2015.

Not just our sense of what's right and what's wrong with the world.

It's our relationship with God.

Carrying around too much anger, or being bitter for too long...

it gets in the way of how we think about God,

how we relate to God,

how we share God with others,

how we see the image of God in other

people...

Unless I'm mistaken, the God we know in Jesus Christ is indeed capable of anger—think about the money changers in the temple—but that anger is never the bottom line for God.

The bottom line, the goal is love.

The bottom line is that we follow a Lord who forgave his executioners.

The goal is reconciliation and relationship and justice and grace.

All of which means you and I have a decision to make.

Do you remember what you put next to you in the pew?

What I put on the bench, right up here?

We can put it back in our hearts.

Or we can leave it here in the sanctuary.

Maybe that's the true beginning of this sermon today.

The decision that you and I will make about what we will do with whatever it was that we put next to us—on the bench, in the pew—maybe that decision is the true beginning of today's sermon.

It's a sermon that each of us will have a chance to preach in the way we live and love in the weeks and months ahead.

I know it might be messy, but with God's love and grace and forgiveness as the goal, you could end up preaching a mighty powerful sermon.

If you get a chance, let me know how it turns out.

(Amen.)