

Dragon's Wine

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Matthew 5:21-24

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We live in an age when anger spreads like an epidemic, when violence has become routine. We live in a time that threatens to wear callouses on our souls so that we barely notice what once horrified us. And, today, we read that Jesus stood on a hillside long ago and in simple haunting words connects the dots between anger and violence.

He doesn't just draw a line of cause and effect between anger and aggression. He tells us they are the same thing. Murder is but the outward expression contempt.

A story:

The little girl goes to bed early. At supper, she could tell a storm was brewing. She didn't know *how* she knew. She didn't really know *what* she knew. She just felt the tension in the air, like a stick that had been bent and bent, and was ready to crack.

She lies in her bed now, hearing the thunder breaking loose through the walls of the house. Voices rising. Voices loud. Crashing voices. Scary voices. Shouts. Crying. Something falling. Then more shouts. Anger storming about from one room to another. Doors slamming.

She pulls the cover up over her head, afraid; she holds herself as closely as she can. Waiting. Just waiting. Waiting as quietly as she can manage. Hoping the storm blows over, wears itself out. It takes a long time, but it does.

Early the next morning, before anyone else is up. The little girl slips out of her house and appears at the backdoor of her grandmother's house, casually saying she'd come for breakfast. But her grandmother knows. Over biscuits and jam and chocolate milk, her grandmother asks, "Was it loud at your house again last night, honey?" The little girl crawls up onto her grandmother's lap, and cries.

Another story.

There's this family headed to the movie on a Saturday afternoon. They are driving downtown to a theater. They've stopped at a four-way intersection, and are just rolling again, when a big SUV whips out of nowhere, doesn't stop at his stop sign, and they have to slam on their brakes to prevent a collision.

The guy driving the SUV realizes that he has almost caused a terrible accident. He stops just beyond the intersection, jumps out of his vehicle, and runs back to check on the folks in the family car. But before he can reach it, the man driving his family has leaped out of his car. And immediately, he's yelling at the SUV driver. His fists are doubled up and he is ready to fight. He's yelling every insult he can think of at the other driver, threatening him, saying,

“Just because I don’t drive a big fancy truck like yours, you think you’ve got the right to run me off the road.” The SUV driver, who was apologizing the whole way over, sorry for his lapse of attention, runs back to his SUV and speeds off.

Another story.

A lonely kid sits at his computer in his room. His home is not without affection. After his parents divorced and his dad moved away, his mom has worked as hard to find interests they could share, as she has to put food on the table and pay the mortgage. She knows her son is depressed, but lots of adolescents go through that. He keeps to himself, but lots of teenaged boys do that. He sits alone in front of his computer, his door closed, but that’s not unusual either. But he’s not just lonely. He feels the stings of being a loner at school. He’s been bullied some, and found a little power himself in bullying. He feels worthless and unconnected. And sitting there at his computer has found other boys that dream of achieving power and recognition through violence.

One morning that looks like every other morning, he wakes up, has his cereal, waves to his mother as she leaves the house for work, and calmly prepares to slaughter his classmates. I wish his story was unique. But we can’t pretend it is and we shouldn’t pretend that it is a natural phenomenon bound to happen from time to time.

We could tell dozens of stories just like these, couldn’t we?

Grudges smoldering until tempers flame out of control. Sufferings of the soul transformed into unspeakable acts of violence. Frustrations held and coddled until they grow into furies. Resentments boiling over. Anger, hot and fast, intoxicating us, with what that theologian-psychologist of the ancient church, Evagrius Pointicus, called “the wine of dragons,” because it not only intoxicates and hampers inhibitions, it fuels the dragon’s consuming fires.*

There’s nothing like anger that in the moment so thoroughly fools us into thinking it has made us strong, when in fact it has rendered us impotent. There’s nothing that so puffs us up with self-righteous indignation and zeal, only to deflate us later and make us realize how foolish we have been.

And Jesus discerns in anger something even more dangerous. He sees in anger that which would, if it could, annihilate the other. He sees the murder in the rage.

And at the root of the anger, he sees the lovelessness and insecurities that breed the fears that drive us to wound others.

And, rather than threaten an external divine punishment for this dangerous drive, Jesus warns us of the natural consequences that will take us from fear to anger, from anger to settled hatred, and from hatred to murder, and he shows us the damage this will do, not just to others, but to ourselves.

And he reminds us that there is no such thing as the hatred of others unless first we hate ourselves.

In Clarence Jordan's beloved Southern translation of the New Testament, The Cotton Patch Gospels, Jesus' words read like this:

"You learned that it was said to the old-timers, 'You shall not murder,' and also 'whosoever murders shall be subject to the death penalty.' (Exodus 21:12); but I'm saying to you that everyone who has an attitude of anger toward his brother, shall be subject to the death penalty; and whoever says to his brother, 'Harrka' shall be subject to the court, and whoever says, 'You idiot,' shall be subject to Gehenna."

Jordan, the farming biblical scholar, clears up a couple of matters:

First, what does it mean to say 'Harrka'? He explains that what we are dealing with here is a literary device. "Harrka" is a word intended to imitate the sound of someone harking or clearing their throat prior to spitting. Not a very nice thing to do. The person is actually preparing to spit on his brother as a sign of contempt.

Second, Jordan explains the connection between anger and the execution of the angry, that troubling reference in the text to the death penalty. He says that the contempt in which we hold another person sets us on the road to destruction.

I am reminded here of Elie Wiesel's powerful reflection on the Holocaust, in which he says that the murder of a single person is a Holocaust, because it erases from the earth all past and all potential life related to the one murdered.

What we often do not realize, however, and what Jesus so starkly points out, is the self-destruction, the self-annihilation, the *auto-da-fe*, of the one who hates. To have contempt for one person is to have contempt for all, and this contempt is itself not only a homicide, but suicide.

Jack Kornfield tells the story of the man who said, "I inherited from my father, his eyes, his nose, and his ears, and his manner of speaking. And I inherited from my mother, her utter contempt for my father." So every time he looks in the mirror, he sees in himself his father's features, and has contempt for what he sees.**

Just to flip over God's commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, we must notice also that if we hate ourselves, it is impossible not to despise our neighbors. Humanity must be loved as it is, warts and all, or else we do not love. And the end of that road of loathing and self-loathing is Gehenna, the trash heap beyond the city's walls where, according to Rabbinical Judaism, the fires burn forever. Gehenna, by the way, this place where anger takes us, was also the place where in the dark dim past of antiquity, children were sacrificed. It is still the place where children are sacrificed.

We are unable to have for others a higher esteem than the esteem in which we hold ourselves. Our antennae are tuned to feel a slight, intended or not. Those who are truly insecure are so hungry for affirmation that they make themselves objects of contempt. And so the cycle turns. Their low view of themselves, expressed in boasting, or making all sorts of demands upon others, or isolating themselves from others, is confirmed by the low opinion others have of them. Doubts about self-worth stir up anger, not humility.

We human beings, Jesus knows, will never deal adequately with the moral and ethical challenges facing us just by conforming to external standards of righteousness and by facing external threats of punishment. We don't ever really change unless and until our hearts change.

All of us have our "unfinished business of the heart."* We all have rough edges and blind spots we've not sorted out. There are in all of us dark corners in the basements of our souls where nightmares breed. No matter how self-aware we may be, we all have triggers that can be pulled and buttons that can get pushed. And when that happens we can all say and do things in haste which we regret at leisure. And when our nightmares try to claim our daydreams, things can get really dicey, not only for others, but for us.

Jesus had the most remarkable talent for ferreting-out the inner causes of our external failings. He saw through the hungers and thirsts that drive us. He knew the deep hidden causes and motivations of our actions.

Generations of commentators have wondered if Jesus was perhaps exaggerating when he said that anger and murder are flip-sides of the same coin. But we know better in our hearts. Sometimes so little constrains us. And too often those constraints are too weak to hold. And we feel so powerless in the face of so much anger, hatred, aggression and violence.

This week Julie Grant Meyer shared with me a quote from her former Rabbi, David Goldstein, the long time rabbi of one of our neighboring synagogues. I've been thinking about Rabbi Goldstein's words all week. I have found real comfort in what he said:

"You are not required to repair the entire world ... only to elevate the space on which you stand."

Most of us probably know, if not the lonely bullied teenager, aggrieved and "twitching like a finger on the trigger of a gun"***; we all know, if not the angry father whose defensiveness and lack of self-regard is ready to strike whomever he thinks offends his dignity; we all know, if not the little girl curled up and terrified as her parents fight; if not one of these, we all know someone who suffers in the epidemic of anger.

We all know someone who needs to be heard. We all know someone who needs to look into a human eye, to know they are seen, noticed, taken seriously, and regarded as worthwhile.

Instead of joining the chorus of anger that only fuels the fury around us, we can become the instruments of peace that the Spirit is shaping us to be. We can, at least, bolster our immune systems so we don't catch the contagion. We can learn to find inside ourselves that space that allows us to reflect and to respond with understanding and grace instead to react in anger and aggression.

We can elevate the place on which we stand, and maybe that is our part in God's repairing of this shattered world.

Amen

*Gabriel Bunge, "Dragon's Wine and Angel's Bread: The Teachings of Evagrius Ponticus on Anger and Meekness" (Crestview, NY: 2009), 26.

**Both from Jack Kornfield, Heart Wisdom Hour.

***Paul Simon, "My Little Town"