

Lent Series '17
Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 26, 2017
Seven Deadly Sins: Wrath
Father Mike Holloran

It's an angry scene in today's gospel. "I told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again?" "You were born totally in sin, and you are trying to teach us?"

In the traditional lists of the seven deadly sins, anger is called wrath, an excessive, disproportionate anger. It is wrath, not mere anger, that inspires such colorful expressions as "Fly off the handle", "flip your wig", "hit the ceiling", "go ballistic". Another word for "angry" is "mad", which otherwise means insane.

The word "wrath" is also used in the Bible referring to God. He punished them in His wrath. Moses turned back God's wrath. The day of wrath is the last day, when the wicked finally get what's coming to them. However, St. Thomas Aquinas cautioned us about attributing human emotions to God, whose ways are not our ways, and whose thoughts are not our thoughts. Thomas said this:

"Because to punish is properly the act of an angry man, God's punishment is metaphorically spoken of as His anger." In other words, we punish when we are angry, so we imagine that God is angry when He punishes. But you don't have to be angry when you punish. When I was a kid, if I ignored dad's warning he would send me upstairs to wait for him. I guess that gave his wrath time to cool down, and gave me time for reflection. Then he would come up the stairs with the paddle and deliver the strokes. It was a dispassionate administration of justice, not a devastating outbreak of wrath.

So God need not be flipping His wig to punish. And in fact, He doesn't need to deliver the strokes Himself. If we reject His wisdom and go off seeking our own happiness in our own way it usually doesn't turn out well. We experience wrath, but is our own human wrath turned against ourselves in the form of unreasoning resentment, disproportionate vengeance, insane violence, total war, eternal self-damnation. God we can trust, it's our own wrath we should fear.

Wrath is excessive anger, but anger is simply an emotional reaction, neither good nor bad in itself; a strong feeling of displeasure, usually aroused by some threat or a sense of injury. So anger can be a useful motivator if we have to fight off an attacker or tell somebody something they don't want to hear. But because anger is so motivating, it readily escalates to wrath, escaping the control of reason.

We think of quick-tempered people as the ones with the anger issues. They fly off the

handle, blast the offender and everyone else in the immediate vicinity, and then they're fine. But the ones blasted aren't so fine, and they can have their own anger issues. They may stew in their resentment, brood over the injury, revel in thinking the worst of the offender beyond all evidence. They may eventually explode, or the revenge may be as subtle and calculated as arsenic in the morning coffee. In either case the anger takes over, inflicting vengeance out of proportion to the injury. Sometimes slow-cook anger can spread through a whole society, breeding contempt for whole groups that can break out in massacre and genocide. Otherwise rational people lose themselves in blood-lust so dark and deep as to be demonic, a frenzy of destruction for the sake of destruction.

So, anger itself can be good, motivating us to rise to the defense of justice, but when it becomes disordered wrath it violates justice. Like fire it is useful in its place, but dangerous. How can we keep anger in its place so that it doesn't burn down the house? There are practical remedies. For example:

Understand. Since anger is a natural response to some threat or injury, it helps to understand the threat or injury. Why am I feeling the way I am? Is my complaint legitimate or am I being over-sensitive? Why is the other doing what they are doing? Sometimes we don't want to understand the other because it feels like cutting them slack they don't deserve. But understanding isn't the same as excusing, or rolling over. If I don't want to understand because I want to blast them, am I desiring conflict rather than peace? Making an effort to understand can keep the house from burning down.

Communicate. Talk to the person who is aggravating you. They may not know they are doing it. Sometimes we're afraid to tell them because if we tell them and they persist we'll get madder yet. To maximize your chance of success, understand first. Is it realistic to expect this person to make this kind of change? Standing in the rain telling it how annoying it is will only get you wet. But humans aren't blind forces of nature. Sometimes they surprise you. Understanding the other will help you express your concern in a way they can understand and accept. And be respectful. Passive means being a door mat. Aggressive is anger on the attack. Assertive is explaining clearly and calmly how you feel without attacking the other. Be assertive. But we don't have to be assertive all the time about everything. That gets tiresome for people stop listening.

Practice. Patience. St. Vincent de Paul was such a gentle, considerate man that people had no idea it took him twenty years to conquer his quick temper. He said of himself that, except for the grace of God, he would have been "hard and repulsive, rough and cross". Practice simple things, like when another driver does something stupid think of a time you did something stupid too. If you can't think of anything, ask your wife. If you have slipped into the habit of verbalizing your displeasure in ways you wouldn't want your mother to hear, start each day with this prayer, borrowed from Psalm 141:

"O Lord, put a guard at the door of my lips". Repeat throughout the day as needed.

In a moment of provocation say “God bless you” instead of that other thing. At first it may feel completely artificial and insincere, but keep at it. Anger takes over by indulging it. Patience takes over by practicing it.

Pray. St. Vincent de Paul practiced patience, but he recognized the grace of God as key to his success. Prayer opens our minds and hearts to the grace of God. We don't need to conquer wrath on our own. The wisdom of God helps us understand ourselves and others, enabling us to step back and look at a situation more objectively. Problems shrink down to size when looked at from the perspective of eternity. So ask God's wisdom in humble prayer.

The power of God can help us put into practice helpful remedies. Many people report being able to do things they thought beyond their powers when they invoked the Holy Spirit. So call on God's power in fervent prayer.

And pray for the person provoking you. Perhaps they may change. You certainly will. When we pray for someone, we are acting on their behalf, taking their side before God. This doesn't mean taking their side in the argument, or letting them get away with murder. It does mean that you are asking God to bless them with whatever particular grace they are needing at this point in their life. This defuses your own anger. It's hard to hate someone you are praying for, which is why Jesus told us to pray for our enemies. It is important not to hate, for love greases our skid into heaven.

Last point, but not least: what's another name for refusing to hate, but instead asking God to deliver your enemy from evil? Forgiveness.

Understanding, communication, practice, prayer, and forgiveness will keep anger from growing into wrath and burning down the house.