

APOSTOLIC ANGER MANAGEMENT

Sermon, May 16, 2010

Text: Acts 16:16-34

Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, "In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." I've mentioned this before, but I have always liked Phyllis Diller's paraphrase of this verse: "Don't go to bed angry ... stay up and fight!" In and of itself, anger is not inherently wrong. Frankly, I worry about you if you do not (or *can* not) get angry. In fact, anger can be a powerful impetus for good; as someone once put it, "The person who cannot be angry at evil usually lacks enthusiasm for the good." Properly managed, anger can be good and even productive.

We see two prime examples of Paul managing his anger in the reading from Acts. Remember Paul and his traveling companions had gone west, and their first stop was the Roman colony of Philippi. In the center of Philippi was a Roman-built highway that went right up into the heart of Europe; as mentioned last week, it was here in Philippi that the Gospel went westward into Europe. The first European convert here was my daughter's namesake, a woman named Lydia, a seller of purple cloth. She was probably wealthy, with wealthy clientele, as purple was the color of royalty, power, affluence. She insisted Paul and the others stay with her. So far, so good, for the missionaries! They had a new convert who had money and influence and powerful connections, she was eager to help, and she offered the use of her big house, which would be just perfect for the new church that would be planted there. This mission to the West seemed to be working out just fine ... so far.

As we pick up the story today we read as Paul and the others were on their way to the place of prayer, a slave girl with an evil spirit began running behind them saying, "These men are servants of the most high God, who are telling you the way to be saved." Her words were actually quite true, but for obvious reasons it must have been terribly irritating. She just wouldn't stop! Verse 18 says, "She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled ... " Some nuance of the original language can be missed in this translation. The Revised Standard has, "... but Paul was so *annoyed* ..." He was "troubled" in the sense that he was irritated, he was annoyed, he was angry! In a fit of pique, Paul turned around, and he just ordered that spirit of evil to come right out of her in the name of Jesus Christ.

Personally, I find it reassuring that, essentially, here was the giant of the faith, the great St. Paul, and this girl *bugged* him ... more precisely, this girl's *behavior* bugged him. He cast the spirit of evil out of the girl because he was angry. Which, by the way, is more than a good enough reason to get rid of evil. After a while you just get tired of putting up with it. There comes a point when patience and tolerance reach their limits. If we care anything at all for what is good and right, then evil *should* anger us, and we need to turn and in the name of Jesus Christ try and put a stop to it. "The person who cannot be angry at evil usually lacks enthusiasm for the good." Note, though, Paul was *slow* to anger ... it was only after several days of this constant haranguing he reacted. Make no mistake, though, he *was* annoyed ... but he constructively channeled that anger and used it as an opportunity to heal a tormented soul. And for what it is worth, please note: He drove the *spirit of evil* away, he did not drive the troubled girl away.

As the text tells us, this slave-girl used to make her owners a lot of money telling fortunes. We're told the owners of the slave girl are quite upset by this, they stand to lose a lot of money over her freedom from the clutches of evil, so they drag Paul in front of the magistrates. These disgruntled men incite a crowd, and the magistrates go on to order Paul and Silas be stripped and whipped, beaten by flogging.

Interestingly, later on in Acts, chapter 22, in another scene altogether, Paul is nearly lynched by the Jews in the Temple area. There's a near riot, the Romans break into the Temple area and see Paul at the center of it all, they grab him and take him into the security of the Roman garrison. There they tie him up, and as they are getting ready to flog him, Paul says, in so many words, "You can't do this to me. I'm a Roman citizen!" Upon hearing this, the centurion who tied him up is scared to death, because of the judgement that could fall on him for only having *tied up* a Roman citizen, let alone beat one, and especially without a trial. So, the commander of the garrison orders that Paul be untied immediately, he apologizes profusely to Paul, and Paul goes free.

Back to Acts 16. We now know that Paul and Silas are both Roman citizens. They both have this passport in their pocket which will guarantee them careful protection under the law throughout the Roman

empire. And they are in Philippi, a prominent Roman colony. Yet here, these Roman citizens, Paul and Silas, keep their mouths shut in front of the magistrates, and they are beaten half to death and thrown into jail! What's going on? Why don't they angrily and indignantly announce their identity as Roman citizens, and spare themselves this suffering? There has to be a very good reason. We don't know a whole lot about Silas, but we do know something about Paul. We know he isn't stupid. It wasn't that he couldn't remember; he didn't sit there in that Philippian jail tending his wounds and then go, "Oh, yeah, I'm a Roman citizen. I forgot. I shoulda said something!" He knows all he had to do was flash his Roman ID at any time. So, we have to ask, "Why did he keep his mouth shut?" Well, let's follow the story.

They are thrown into prison, they are chained and put in stocks. Verse 25 tells us during the night they were singing and praying. Well, maybe one of their "hymns" was an early version of Elvis Presley's Jailhouse Rock, because that's what happened! A violent earthquake shook the foundations of the prison (v 26), as the door jambs twisted and hinges broke due to the shifting foundation the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer is alarmed, thinking that everybody's escaped, the magistrates will have his head (literally) for this, so he draws his sword and is about to kill himself. However, Paul and his fellow prisoners did not run out, they have stayed put, and Paul yells out, "We're all here, don't harm yourself!" The jailer is so amazed, so impressed by all this, that he becomes a believer on the spot; he is baptized along with his household. T

Then in verse 35, we read, "When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order, 'Release those men.' The jailer told Paul, 'The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace.' But Paul said to the officers: 'They beat us publicly without a trial, *even though we are Roman citizens*, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.'" NOW he tells them!

Why didn't he say this 24 hours earlier? He certainly would've saved himself and Silas a lot of trouble. Why did he wait till now to tell them he was a Roman citizen? Read on. Verse 38 The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed (*that's Greek for "they were scared out of their wits."*) They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left."

Now note: Who is this crowd that came out of the prison? Paul, and Silas, *and the local magistrates*. You have to remember these magistrates are probably scared to death. They had beaten Roman citizens, without a trial, and left them chained and in stocks overnight in a prison. They could be literally crucified for this ... **if** it is reported. Paul and Silas take these magistrates, go to visit Lydia's home, other members of that new faith community were there, and I can imagine they all sort of sat around and exchanged polite remarks and nervous chatter, and Paul and Silas don't have to say a word. But the unspoken point is clear. "Magistrates, we're leaving town. But there's a growing community of Christians who meet in the home of this distinguished woman, and maybe you should get to know them. This is a community concerned more about reconciliation than revenge. And oh, by the way, if anything should happen to this woman or the people who worship in her house, we just might have to report what happened to us here. And that would be too bad, wouldn't it?" That unspoken message is certainly clear.

It is quite possible the magistrates were both so frightened and so impressed by all this that they became part of that church led by this dynamic and distinguished seller of purple. This church went on to become a most influential faith community. Perhaps these magistrates were moved by the mercy of Paul and Silas, perhaps they were moved by these men who were willing to endure great suffering to protect this family of God, to see the family of God grow; perhaps they were moved by these men who managed their anger and chose not to report them, thus sparing them the punishment they deserved by law ...perhaps they were so moved by all this that they were ready to learn about a merciful Savior who also was unjustly flogged, a Savior who also bore undeserved punishment, in order to protect and enlarge the family of God, a Savior who manages His anger and spares His people from their deserved punishment by His personal sacrifice, a Savior by Whose stripes they, too, could be healed.

Apostolic anger management. "Be ye angry ... but sin not." Paul and Silas managed their anger to a good and productive end; they were willing to make this personal sacrifice in order to help establish this new mission, this new community of faith, and to do whatever it took to make this community grow.

After all, it always takes sacrifice to establish and grow a church. Amen.