

Jesus Confronts My Angry Tirade

A sermon on Matthew 5:21-37 & Romans 3: 9-22 by Nathan Nettleton, 28 June 2020

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Message

The abusive use of anger to manipulate other people's behaviour is, Jesus says, on the same spectrum as physical violence, and Jesus calls this preacher to repent of it.

Sermon

This is the first time I've preached here for three months, and what a week to choose. I didn't really choose it, it chose me. There are more visiting preachers booked up, but I wasn't able to get one for this week. Maybe it was the topic. Jesus's hardline teaching on murder and adultery is not something preachers queue up to preach on.

As events have unfolded, it could have been an easy preach, because we just heard Jesus's tough challenge to men who can't keep their wandering eyes and wandering hands to themselves – better to tear out your eyes and cut off your hands he said – and this week we have seen one of our High Court judges disgraced for exactly that. It would be very easy for me to run with that and preach up a sermon for the #MeToo age, piling condemnation on the judge, and no doubt there'd be a few social media likes in that.

But as we heard in our reading from his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul says we will be missing the point if we focus on what the Biblical teaching condemns in other people. The question is, what is it saying to us? To me? Paul says that all of us are tangled in a web of sin, and so the wayward judge is no more guilty than I am; different sins maybe, but we both stand before the standards of God's love and integrity with nothing to offer but failure and brokenness.

And as it happens, I don't have to step back very far this week to see myself reflected in the mirror of Jesus's challenges just as clearly as the judge. You see, we also heard Jesus say, "Don't think that stopping short of murder marks you out as a pillar of righteousness. If you want a standard to aim at, try this: if you lose your temper with people, you will be brought to justice; and if you spit insults at people, you'll be dragged before the courts; and if you call someone dickhead, you will probably burn in hell!" That's what Jesus says, and just ten days ago, I lost my temper and sent you all an angry email saying I was really pissed off, and accusing you of various things. And to make matters worse, it wasn't just a heat of the moment thing. I wrote it, stewed on it for another 24 hours, and then sent it.

So this evening I stand before you as one who is called to account, big time, by the very scripture he is called to preach on.

Now if I was to get all lawyerly, and chop that email into little bits, I would probably be able to find lawyerly ways of defending some semblance of truth in each little bit. But splitting hairs over the bits would just be a way of avoiding the glaringly obvious fact that when all the bits were put together, that email was a violent assault and its tone and impact were abusive and bullying. And getting all lawyerly in order to manufacture an image of righteousness is exactly what Jesus is challenging here. Over and over he says, "The law says this, but I'm saying you can do better than that."

Now I know that some of you will object to that, and jump to my defence. I have already heard some of you doing a very impressive job of lawyering it for me. You've said things like "it was harsh, but it needed to be said", and "it's good that our pastor is allowed to be human and can allow himself to be seen as human." I appreciate your concern and your loyalty and your desire to defend me but, I'd be grateful if you stop, at least in public. It will only exacerbate the hurt for others, and I've done more than enough damage already.

There are others who are more vulnerable to being painfully wounded, and who are much less likely to say anything at all about what I did. They know, and I know, that what I did was violent, abusive, and bullying. And it was premeditated. The fact that I more or less told you up front in the first line of the email that that was what was coming doesn't excuse it or lessen the hurt that those people suffered.

So the first thing I need to say to all of you, and especially to those who were most wounded by my words, is I am sorry. I failed you, and I'm sorry. I failed to be the pastor that I am called to be, and I am sorry. And the words of Jesus, which had been scheduled for reading tonight many months ago, have turned their spotlight on me and found me out.

I am going to try to explore a bit of what led to this failure, but I am not trying to make excuses, or give myself wriggle room to water down the apology. Rather I am trying to reach a point of understanding that will help reduce the likelihood of me falling into the same failure again, and I am hoping that exploring it here alongside these words from Jesus will help us all to understand better how to live into this teaching from the Sermon on the Mount.

You see, the very next words from Jesus are about putting his teaching into practice by making a priority of sorting out our differences and settling our disputes in appropriate and respectful ways. Whatever it was that was upsetting me in the first place, I did not deal with it in a constructive, gentle and respectful way. But I wasn't the first and I won't be the last to fall short of that, so let me try to unpack what I've learned and am learning from my stuff up.

Some of you who have sought to defend me have pointed out that this weird pandemic lockdown time is a time when everyone is anxious and stressed, and that means lots of us are operating on a shorter fuse than normal. And you've noted that I've been overworking pretty badly, and not eating or sleeping or recreating very well. All those things are true, and I've reached for them to excuse myself too, but the truth is that they are not excuses. They help explain why I was more likely to behave badly at this time, but they don't excuse it.

Being angry or upset at people is not a sin. Expressing it violently and abusively is. And it was when I crossed from the first to the second, that I stuffed up and assaulted you. At the time, I tried to dress it up as me being angry on behalf of other people, on behalf the visiting preachers who had given of themselves most generously, and who I thought deserved at least some comments and gratitude on the website. I haven't changed my view on that, but if I'm honest about it, what was really going on inside me was a lot more self-indulgent than that. I had asked nicely several times for people to start posting comments, and so few people had responded that I was feeling ignored. It hurt to feel ignored, and I responded to my own hurt by having a tantrum and lashing out at you.

Some of you have heard me say that it wasn't a tantrum because I took time and weighed up my decision, but I realise now that I was kidding myself. A slow burn tantrum is still a tantrum.

I'm not apologising for feeling hurt. That just is what it is. Feelings happen. I'm apologising for how I reacted to those feelings. So how could I or should I have responded?

I could have just swallowed it. Pastoral ministry is frequently full of pain and feelings of being unheard or ignored. It has been at least since God told Jeremiah that he was being sent to preach to a people who would block their ears and close their hearts. It comes with the territory, and anyone who can't deal with that most of the time will not last long in pastoral ministry. So I could have just swallowed it, and that would certainly have been better than what I did, but I'm not convinced that it is always the best option. These words from Jesus encourage us to talk about our hurts and sort them out, not to bury them.

So I think I could have expressed them, but that needed to be done in a much more appropriate and loving way. Tantrums are not devoid of love, but they are not acts of love. It is only because I love you people that I can feel hurt by you. The psychologists say that a child usually only throw tantrums in a relationship where they feel secure enough to get away with it. But I'm not a child, and a tantrum itself is not a loving act; it is a violent betrayal of the love and care that exists between us. And because I am your pastor, my words and actions come from a privileged place of power and thus have a disproportionate impact. So my tantrum was a betrayal of my pastoral call too.

Afterwards, Margie passed on to me a wise little one liner from one of her trusted confidants. She said, "always go more in sorrow rather than in anger." Now that's a wise bit of communications strategy: I would have been more likely to get my point through by communicating my feelings of being sad and disappointed than by exploding in violent anger.

But it is more than just a communications strategy. It also points to what was really going on. The real issue was me feeling hurt. The anger was like a mask for that. The anger was like a self-protection mechanism to bury my hurt and vulnerability under something that felt more powerful and in control. So the anger that I put out there wasn't really even that honest. It wasn't the real issue. So I not only wounded you, but I pulled the wool over my own eyes and made it harder for myself to recognise and process my real feelings. Nobody wins out of that, even if I manage to get you to do what I said I wanted. Bullying and abuse can "work" but everybody loses, including the abuser.

So one big learning is that when I'm feeling angry and violent, I need to stop and peel away the layers and see what's really going on under that. What sort of sorrows are being hidden under the frightened anger. And then I need to find appropriate and respectful ways of expressing the real feelings, the real issues.

There is a second learning that came from Margie passing on that wise little one-liner. I've got to ask myself why I didn't consult with Margie or anyone else before I sent the email. If I had, she probably would have passed on that little pearl then, and it might have headed off my violent stuff up. I've been thinking about that since, and I realise that one of the things I admire about Margie's leadership style is that she always consults others when she is preparing to communicate something tough or emotionally fraught. She puts herself down

and says that sometimes she consults for so long that she misses the moment, but I tend to do the opposite. I back my own judgement without consulting, and I might not miss the moment, but I often miss the mark instead. I certainly did this time. So, take-away learning: consult before pulling the trigger because others might ask the right questions or offer the right suggestions that pull me up short and enable me to look at myself much more clearly. All the more important when I know I am fatigued and run down.

Another learning came from a comment that Samara made to me, though she thinks it came from Richard Rohr. She said that we should still pay attention to critical feedback even if we don't like how it is delivered. Even if it's only 20% accurate, we can still decide how we will respond to the true 20%. Now Samara was saying it in relation to how people might respond to my angry tirade, but I soon realised that I had to learn from that too. Because a couple of people got back to me and told me in no uncertain terms how disappointed they were in me and how inappropriate they thought my tirade was. And my instinctive reaction was to find bits of what they said which I could convince myself were not true, and thereby dismiss the whole lot. But the truth is that they were probably 90% right, and I'd better work out what I'm going to do with the true parts, not write it all off over a fragment that missed the mark.

Look, this sermon feels very incomplete, because it is. This incident was a major brain explosion, and it's only ten days ago, and I think I'm going to be picking up the pieces and sorting them out for a while. I've got a lot of work still to do on it, both in my own prayer and with my supervisor, my spiritual director, and our Visiting Pastoral Overseers. This is kind of where I'm up to so far, and I'm sharing it now because I need to say sorry and because the set gospel reading kind of demands that I work some of this out in public right here and now.

Jesus challenges us to stop the lawyering and to face up to ourselves. He calls us to recognise that the absence of physical violence and bloodshed doesn't mean that no violence was done and that no one got unfairly hurt. Violence begins in our hearts and minds and when we don't name it and confront it, it can come out through our mouths or our emails just as much as through our fists.

Jesus also shows us where to go with that. He models for us a pattern of laying down our weapons – both physical weapons and verbal or emotional weapons – and standing up for the truth, boldly but vulnerably. He doesn't conceal the truth under anger, and nor does he sweep it under the carpet and pretend that our hurts don't matter. And if worst comes to worst, he will go to his own death on a cross before he will sell out his love for us and lift and hand or a keyboard in violence or rage. I failed to follow him there last week, but I want to learn from it and learn to follow him there in the future.

That's going to take me a long time, and funnily enough, my attempts to promote commenting on sermons on the website has instead stirred up a counter-argument that says that we shouldn't even *allow* comments on the site.

Statement from Roslyn Wright, Visiting Pastoral Overseer

I'm here tonight as your Visiting Pastoral Overseer. I have made the decision that there will be no online comments for this sermon and instructed Nathan to shut that down. The Host Group will review that when they meet. My reason is that neither you nor Nathan will learn

from positive responses there at present. And if there are negative responses, that is not the place for them to be aired.

As one of your visiting preachers I will be making a statement to the Host Group to as to why I think the comments section should be completely removed from the website. I hope that you can all engage in some open discussion about that.

Nathan saw the need for this apology and used me as a sounding board for tonight. He recognises there is hurt and wounding. For healing to happen Nathan needs to know the impact of his words and actions. One person has already spoken to me. I think there may be others. Silence or shutting down doesn't help the life of this community. If you do not feel able to speak with Nathan or the Host Group then I am available. My contact details will go out with the Sermon and Notices email.