

As we move into later summer and are heading towards early autumn, I've been enjoying the changing wildflowers that appear. I love wildflowers, as do most of you, I imagine, but one thing I've discovered is that I'm not terribly discriminating in my wildflower tastes. Which is to say, that I'm not as vigilant in recognizing and disliking invasive species as many of you are. For example, lupine is an invasive, but I love lupine. A more controversial example is tansy. I don't have strong feelings about tansy either way, but many knowledgeable gardeners and conservationists are passionate in their desire to do away with it altogether. The challenge is that, like so many invasives, as soon as the smallest foothold is gained, they can spread like wildfire. So, if you aren't able to prevent it from taking hold in the first place, or if you don't successfully eradicate it at the first sign, you've got a steep battle ahead of you.

As is so often the case, this pattern in nature mirrors larger life patterns. As we know, it's also true in how *we live* that if we allow a little of a negative thing to take root, it often will grow into a *lot* of a negative thing that can overwhelm us. Just one drink is one drink too many for an alcoholic. Or you don't make the apology you should have made right away, and after a while the chasm between you and the other person seems just too wide to bridge. Or you tell one little lie to save face, and pretty soon you're in a giant web of deception as your one little lie snowballs into repeated lie after lie. In many circumstances, it's so much wiser to simply not give any foothold to something that may be tempting and easy in the short run, but will go rogue and multiply exponentially in the long run.

This is the wisdom we find in our lesson from Ephesians this morning. Last week our lesson from Ephesians held up the importance of living wisely, particularly of making good use of our time and making good choices. This week we follow up with some rather specific warnings about particular practices or behaviors, underlined by the dramatic phrase: "Do not make room for the devil." What might that mean? "Do not make room for the devil." Here, I think is the warning to not neglect to eradicate the moral equivalent of the tansy the first time it makes an appearance--or before you know it, it's everywhere. Don't ignore the

beginnings of the bad. Don't make room for the devil by starting down a dark road, assuming you can always pull back. It doesn't always work that way. Far better to not start down the road at all. And two behaviors are held up in particular as ways we can find ourselves making room for the devil before we recognize the long-range consequences. They are: how we deal with anger, and how we use our words. Separate topics, but also related topics, as anger can certainly impact our speech.

Before we think about these two particular behaviors named in Ephesians, though, I want to just make a quick detour back to our Old Testament lesson from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 19. The story of the prophet Elijah, who lived in Israel in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, is a powerful story, as Elijah was both a bold prophet on behalf of God and also a worker of miracles. But in spite of his effectiveness and godliness, Elijah was no stranger to despair and depression, as we find when we meet up with him in this lesson. He is so weary of life's struggles, that he makes his way into the desert wilderness, sits down under a solitary tree, and begs God to take his life. Certainly this is a valuable reminder to us that despair and/or depression can manifest within anyone, regardless of how faithful or how successful they may be. Anyone who has dealt with depression understands that this is an illness as real as heart disease or cancer, and it can impact anyone at any time. That's why we don't harshly judge ourselves or others at such times. No one looks to be in despair. It just happens. But we find out how God deals with us and others in such times in our lesson today. There is no judgement. There is instead understanding and the provision of practical needs. I'm not suggesting that serious cases of long-term depression can be easily resolved, but in *this* case, for Elijah's immediate despair, there is a simple solution. Basically, Elijah needs a nap and a snack. Not unlike weary, hungry children, and not unlike ourselves, when we are weary and hungry. Elijah's emotional reactivity is directly related to his basic needs for rest and nourishment. Rest and nourishment are what God provides through angelic intervention. Such a good reminder to us that sometimes what we or someone else need most of all is simply a good night's sleep and a nutritious meal. And the consequence of being without that snack and nap when needed, is that we frequently become a bad version of ourselves. Elijah, in our text, becomes despairing, even suicidal, in fact. Other times, when we are pushed beyond our limits, we become angry, sometimes to the point of being violent. We're familiar with

those Snickers bars commercials that end “you’re not yourself when you’re hungry”. And the word “hangry” has been coined to bring together the idea of being hungry and angry, a toxic combination. Within the recovery community, the acronym HALT is used to remind people to halt and do a self-inventory before acting out the worst versions of themselves; HALT is a shortcut reminder to ask ourselves if we are hungry, angry, lonely, or tired--halt. And if we are, we should probably not say or act as we are tempted to do at the height of the reactivity. In fact, to do so might be to make room for the devil, to let that first tansy begin to take over the field. God looks to provide for us the rest and nurture we need, and we are far better equipped to deal with difficult times if we trust in God’s provision and in our need to acknowledge and tend to those basic needs.

With that in mind, then, let’s think about anger, one of the particular concerns lifted up in Ephesians. I believe we could all be experts on this topic, as it seems to me we live in angry times in an angry nation in an angry world. And because of the infiltration of social media, news forums, and so on, into our lives, sometimes 24/7, anger can certainly seem to be a predominant cultural experience. With the November elections coming up, every candidate hopes we’ll be angry about something, preferably the same thing they are, so that we will vote their way. Anger seems to be standard political currency lately, and it’s corrosive and destructive of our common life and unity. And that’s hardly the only arena for anger. We can be angry not *only* about politics, but about road construction, about how our neighbor is letting their invasive plant species run wild, about how our health care system operates, you name it. Lots of reasons to be angry.

The intriguing thing about our lesson is that it does not say: “You should never be angry”. In fact, it says the opposite. In verse 26 we read: “Be angry.” This is good reality therapy. This Scriptural verse acknowledges that we will be angry, it’s part of the human condition. What’s the use of ordering someone, “Don’t be angry” when anger does happen? And sometimes, of course, we *should* be angry. Anger can be appropriate. Jesus got angry at hypocrisy and greed. Sometimes to *not* be angry would be the wrong thing. However, the verse doesn’t end there, it continues on. “Be angry...*but do not sin*; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.” It would seem that it’s one thing to be angry; it’s another thing entirely to act on that anger in a sinful way, to be aggressive, violent, and enraged. Let’s think this

through. There's a direct connection between feeling slighted and angry and taking your fists or your gun and hurting someone or harming yourself---yes? But, while it's a direct connection, there are a whole lot of steps and choices in between the start point and the end point. And we make better choices if we have done that self-inventory of HALT and made sure we're not overreacting out of hunger, fatigue, or loneliness. Furthermore, Paul writes, "don't let the sun go down on your anger", which is to say....don't hang on to that anger like a cherished possession, wallowing in it, nurturing it, reliving it, building it up, day and after day. Because if you do, you make room for the devil. Instead of dealing with the invasive weed early on, you invite it to spread and grow, and before you know it, your anger is causing you to sin, one way or another. Rage is euphoric while it lasts and can carry us along like the crest of a wave until it crashes --but then we're left with the damage we have created. And so are those who were the recipients of our anger. This Scripture passage seems to be warning us that when angry, we are particularly vulnerable to making room for evil to fester. And while for most of, fortunately, anger doesn't spill out in actual violence or dramatic, self-destructive behaviors, it does come out *so* frequently in the other area we are warned about in these verses: what we say.

Words. Are. Powerful. I still remember some of the hurtful, careless words that wounded me when I was young, and I bet most of you do, too. Words are powerful, and they take on a life of their own once spoken; you can't unspeak them, they are out there, doing good or harm. Words create, and words destroy. Angry words very often are destructive. And to what purpose? Temporary relief bought at the cost of potentially permanent damage. It's not that we can't be or sometimes shouldn't be angry, but we don't have to be malicious. We don't have to be mean-angry. And looking again at our culture, I think it is full of mean-angry words. Literally from the top of our elected leaders and on down, we have become mean spirited in our use of language; words have become a weapon. It's an embarrassment. Our entire culture seems to have lost civility and courtesy in the past years. Mean spirited, malicious words and name calling do not build up unity and the common good in the public sphere nor do they build up the body of Christ within the realm of church and faith. This should be self-evident, but such behavior and language has become so commonplace, that we almost fail to notice it anymore, until it takes over like tansy and chokes out the native wildflowers. This, I

think, should concern and grieve us, as it does God. As people of faith, we are called to a higher standard of living, to deal with our anger *without* being malicious, bitter, and mean. We are called to respect the power of language and to use our words with care, recognizing how wounding destructive words can be. We are, in fact, asked to push back against an angry world—*not by pushing back harder and meaner—but by being kind to one another, tenderhearted, and forgiving of one another*. And that’s a lot to ask. But it can be powerful when it happens.

Here’s a small example: a colleague shared how he saw his daughter-in-law getting more and more angry with her misbehaving children, his naughty grandchildren, and he suggested, “Maybe the kids should go outside and Mom can get a break.” This angry daughter-in-law, feeling judged by her father-in-law, turned to him and snapped, “You’re a fine one to talk!” Whoa---great set up for an angry, relationship destroying exchange of words. But instead, my friend did a HALT, took a breath, and said, “You’re right. I would never hold myself up as an example. I wish I’d been a lot more patient with my kids, like you *usually* are.” His words completely diffused the situation. And he said that their relationship actually changed from that day on; unknown to him, she’d always felt he was judging her. Answering anger or malice with being kind, tender hearted and forgiving, instead of becoming mean spirited or malicious yourself, can create relationships rather than destroy them.

We are then, called to be kind, tender hearted, and forgiving. To be angry, if we must, but not to be mean or malicious or destructive. In being entrusted with this calling we are not left on our own. We are encouraged to imitate Christ, and we are empowered by something else: the seal of the Holy Spirit. In verse 30, Paul wrote, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.” Those words should have a familiar ring to them, because they are part of our service of Holy Baptism. We are not sent out into the world alone to live this high calling; we are sealed by the Holy Spirit, as our text states. We ourselves bear God’s image, and it is sealed upon us, both at the time of our baptism but also throughout our lives of faith. When any of us is baptized, the sign of the cross is made; is sealed; on our forehead with the words, “Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the sign of

the cross forever. Amen.” What image do we, as God’s baptized children bear? The sign of the cross. The seal of the Holy Spirit. It’s encouraging to recognize that we bear that Spirit’s seal upon us as a mark of protection and of being claimed by God. We’re not just floundering about in the world, hapless devil bait, hoping to do some good now and then by accident; we are called, claimed, empowered children of God, sealed and protected by the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ. That’s *so* much better than being marked by malice, or meanness, or contributing to the nastiness in our world by making room for the devil and letting anger overtake us. That’s *not* who we are. We have a higher calling and have been empowered to live it out. “*You* have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” That’s who you are; an imitator of God, and God’s much loved child. Amen.