

Sermon for Sixth Sunday after Trinity
St. Joseph Parish
Matt. 5:20-26

July 27, 2025
Father Herb

This morning, we are going to consider our hygiene..No, not that kind, but spiritual hygiene. And we'll consult with the physicians of souls among the saints of the distant past concerning what Jesus has just said in this morning's gospel about.. Anger.

Let me tell you a story: In the 14th century, there was a rather greedy merchant who was known around town for being prone to anger. He flew into a rage one day because dinner wasn't ready when he arrived home from work. Hoping to shame him into better spiritual hygiene, his wife handed him a book about the saints.

Initially, with his cardiovascular system enraged as well, he threw the book to the floor, but then- ashamed of his temper- he picked the accursed book up and began to read. He became so engrossed in reading about the saints that he forgot about his dinner; indeed, he was completely converted by the experience for he subsequently gave away most of his wealth, turned his home into a hospital, and personally cared for a suffering leper.

When his wife urged him to be prudent in his charities, her husband-who was no longer easily offended by criticism and rebuke-gently reminded her that she was the one who had hoped for his conversion. To which she is supposed to have retorted, "I prayed for rain, but... this is a flood". This was the story of the angry man, St. John Colombini of Siena.

This morning's gospel comes from within Jesus' Sermon on the Mount..the topography reminds us that to attain to the perfection of virtue commanded from up there is an uphill struggle..one the saints experienced, too, particularly with respect to anger. They encourage us to take the climb with the help of God's grace, for sainthood is so worth it, especially when compared to a stroke or a lost love.

We know from scripture that St. Paul and even our Lord were not immune to anger. Saint Paul called the Galatians he loved, "fools " and delivering a dose of hygiene (both kinds were in view) to the Corinthian church in Chapter 4 of his first epistle to them, could barely restrain the anger behind his words. Jesus was enraged upon entering the precincts of the Temple and unleashed his anger upon the moneychangers. In Mt.23, our Lord cursed with woe the scribes and Pharisees as blind and hypocrites for cleansing the

outside of a cup and plate, but inside being full of extortion and rapacity. Yet our Lord acted on behalf of God's agendas, humbly accepting suffering for Himself.

Learning to control anger takes time. So let me tell you another story about anger and patience: In the latter part of the 7th century, the summer crops failed in the Northeast of Scotland.

One late summer afternoon, a farmer was deciding when to go out to gather what he could of the harvest. A couple of days went by and then.. the rains came and stayed and stayed and completely interfered with his plans.

During a brief lull between storms, he went out to a knoll in his muddy boots and angrily complained against God. Realizing suddenly that anger towards God is fraught, he repented and vowed to gain control of his anger. He took a radical step to remind himself of his vow, just as God did after the flood with a rainbow to remind him.

The farmer bound his right hand to his leg with an iron lock and threw the key into the river Dee. He promised that it would never be unlocked until he made a pilgrimage of penitence to the city of Rome. In the suffering of this penance, it took the farmer several years of patient effort, but he eventually arrived in Rome. Hungry one day, the farmer went and purchased a whole fish from an enterprising boy selling at the side of the Tiber river. The boy fileted the creature and inside its stomach was an odd looking key-which of course, opened the lock. Patience in his pilgrimage served him well, for now his harvesting arm and leg were free. This is the story of St. Nathalan of Scotland who was angry with God.

Although Jesus most likely does not expect such radical penance from us, He does want us to control our anger, and he gives us opportunities to do so in everyday life: bearing patiently with others' annoying habits, refusing to yield to the temptation to judge others' motives rashly, to say nothing of holding their persons in contempt, and so on.

Most moderns fail to control anger very well in these days and times, and increasingly, we see anger's violent consequences in the society to which all of us belong.. Trying to control anger leads many to psychotherapists as well as confessors. We all know from our own life experiences that anger, when released, spreads like wildfire through body and soul. It is so difficult to rein in and so used to leading us with lightning speed into the deadly sins of hatred, revenge, even murderous thoughts...So what if we could consult the ancient physicians of souls for this aspect of moral hygiene: anger prevention?

For that buried secret, let's spend a minute or two with the men who became monks in the deserts of 4th century Egypt. Leaving the evils and temptations of Alexandria or

Constantinople, as well as the taxes and military drafts of the time, men who became monks lived out their lives most often in solitary- just to be with God. They occupied their time with prayer, meditation, and self examination.

They looked back constantly on their dark memories of sin, including deeds done in anger, and how those came about. Their accumulated wisdoms are consistently these for preventing anger: watchfulness for the return of those things and situations which tended to prick their character. They readied themselves for restraint when anger was likely to erupt inside them. In other words, they had come to profound self-knowledge by reflecting on their previous misbehaviors.

Along with watchfulness, they recommended silence instead of giving anger a voice. They found, too, that when anger was likely, the response of silence was aided by employing distraction for the mind: to divert their thought into appreciating the harsh beauty of creation in the desert sky above and surrounding their cells and by envisioning the example of our Lord before his inquisitors and upon the Cross. If anger did take hold, they uttered silently the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me, a sinner."

Watchfulness for anger based on past life experience, silence at the surfacing of anger, readying oneself for restraint, distraction of thought ahead of anger, silence in responding to anger, and prayer to ward off the demon are still good preventative medicine for the soul 17 centuries later.

And from the treasures of the past, I pass on to you this spiritual hygiene when anger takes hold:.. **hold the anger as a gift**..a gift that helps us walk joyfully up the mount on which our Lord delivered His sermon. We don't usually think of it this way, but those people who anger us are doing us an unintentional favor. St. Therese of Lisieux continues on with such good spiritual hygiene this way: "When you are angry with someone, the way to find peace is to pray for that person and ..ask God to reward him or her for making you suffer. Those people who anger us are doing us the unintentional favor by allowing us to grow in patience, so we should try to be gentle with them. From the suffering of anger grows the virtue of patience.

Recall the interpersonal context in which our Lord gave us the eucharist. Jesus knew all along who it was that would betray him and expressed not a simmering anger that He suffered, for He was fully human, but exhibited patience with Judas throughout his earthly ministry. At the Last Supper, Judas knew that Jesus knew who had betrayed him when Judas dipped his hand in the dish and asked, "Is it I, Lord?" Jesus did not respond with normal anger as one of us would have if we were being betrayed. Knowing Judas'

fate He said only, “it would have been better for that man if he had not been born”. And when Judas kissed Jesus just as he was being arrested, our Lord still called him “friend”. Jesus was suffering the loss of a disciple’s love, however imperfect, and still rewarded him with the patient love of friendship. From the suffering of anger grows the virtue of patience.