

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Scout Sunday, February 6, 2011
Lessons: Isaiah 58:3-12 and Matthew 5:21-24

TROLLS, BULLIES, AND SHOUTING MATCHES

*But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,
you will be liable to judgment*

Is it possible to live in this world without ever getting angry? If you could shut off your anger completely and never feel it again, would that be a good thing?

Anger is one of our basic affects — one of the biological reactions in our bodies from which we develop our feelings, emotions, and moods. Anger is natural; it's part of our makeup as living creatures, and so we cannot turn it off and never feel it again. The anger affect will be triggered by experiences in our lives. The question is what we will then do with it. Will we control it, guiding our responses to it with our beliefs and commitments, or will the anger control us, giving us angry moods and angry personalities and pushing us toward actions that harm us and others?

Jesus knows that human life is relational. We are defined as human by our relationship with God and our relations with other people. Those who study human behavior know that what we practice we become. The more we practice being angry, ranting and raving at some other person or group we tell ourselves causing us trouble, the more we will become angry people. But it doesn't stop there. Practiced anger leads us toward rage, and rage toward violence. If we do not control our anger, it will control us.

“Practice,” we say, “makes perfect.” Scouts, if you want to learn to tie useful knots quickly when you need them, without going back to the pictures in your scout manual, you practice. If you want to play an instrument well, you practice. The way to learn to read or write better is to read and write. The same is true of our moods and our responses to other people. If we practice caring about the feelings, needs, and rights of others, we will become more the kind of people God created us to be and Jesus calls us to become. If we practice contempt for others, scorning their feelings, needs and rights, we will become people under judgment.

Anger is not all bad. For one thing, anger is necessary to justice, because justice is nothing but an ideal until we learn to get angry at injustices done to other people. We naturally feel anger when something unfair is done to us, but for justice to make progress in a society,

we need to learn to get angry when the injustice is done to somebody else, even though it does not directly hurt us. Such useful anger is something we can control because it comes from compassion for others rather than from shame, and that's a big difference.

Here is a very unpleasant reality about us human beings. As we grow up, we pass through stages during which cruelty provides certain feelings of satisfaction and belonging. It is an exercise in dominating other people — controlling them, pushing them around, making them hurt, embarrassing or even humiliating them. Groups feed on this distorted kind of satisfaction and the heightened feelings of power it gives them. People who have felt shamed, who have been bullied themselves, seem especially prone to putting others down and bullying them, but I think it is an impulse we all have. You can see it at work in little children as they pick on each other, as the bigger one takes what the smaller has or wants (for the sheer joy of being able to take it away), and as children gang up on some chosen victim.

We emerge to become human at a higher level as we learn something called *empathy*, meaning we learn to sense the feelings of other people and so to care about them. Empathy too is a natural human ability. Watch what happens when several babies are together in a room and suddenly one baby starts to cry, voicing distress at something unknown to the others. Soon, the other babies start to cry because one is crying. They pick up the vibrations of distress which trigger the distress affect in them. Only the first baby has the wet diaper or the pain or whatever started him crying. The others cry because he is crying. Babies learn to smile in response to adult smiles. Face-to-face time with our parents or other caring adults starts us off on the higher road of empathy with other people. Cruelty or neglect start the child on the low road that leads to bullying. Growing up loved rather than shamed teaches us to practice a higher level of humanity.

Jesus himself got angry, especially when people abused religion to feed their own pride while showing contempt for other people in distress. Religion can be a matter of learning to trust God and care about people, or it may be used to feed pride and judge or even bully other people.

Schoolyards and playgrounds, churches and workplaces, scout troops and sports teams, neighborhoods and communities have always had their bullies. If anything is different today, it is the constant sound of ranting. *Be angry! Be very angry! Be angry at THEM! They're evil, they're disgusting, and they're out to get you!*

I am reading a good book about terrible events — so terrible it seems almost impossible they could really have happened. But they did happen in Europe in lands caught between Joseph Stalin and Adolph Hitler. The statistic alone is staggering: some fourteen million people were murdered. Even more sickening is not just the indifference toward human life but the delight people took in slaughtering the defenseless, whom they were happy to regard as not

really human. The other evening, we saw on television a group of teenaged boys brutalize their thirteen-year-old victim. What was most disturbing about the video they took to preserve their great achievement was that they were obviously having fun. What we saw was not rage but glee. They thought the whole thing was funny, and they came very close to killing the boy as they enjoyed his anguish.

When I was a kid, trolls were creatures in fairy tales that hid under bridges and attacked goats. Today's trolls are not fictional characters in fantasy novels but real people who hide in the anonymity of cyberspace taking satisfaction and delight in being as cruel as they possibly can while blaming the victims of their cruelty for being so stupid as to be upset by it. They score pride points by being outrageous as they mock the distresses and even tragedies of others. It makes them feel big.

So, we have trolls, bullies, and constant shouting matches on radio, TV, and the Internet. Flaming and shaming other people has become a game, played sometimes for fun and sometimes for political power, celebrity, or financial gain.

Jesus warns us against shaming and dehumanizing each other, because he knows dehumanizing people is the road to murder and has the same spirit as murder. He also, and most emphatically, denies validity to religion that does not seek healing in our relationships and in the human community. "Go, leave your gift at the altar, and first make peace with your sister or brother; only then, go back and offer your gift to God." That's strong stuff. Religious faith proves itself in the way we regard and treat each other. It empowers us to overcome our prejudices, reach across gaps in understanding, and build peace. If our religious faith does not empower us to such peacemaking actions and changes of mind and heart, then God takes offense at our religion and will reject it.

A lot of people think Christianity requires self-humiliation: you have to put yourself down and feel bad about yourself. No, we already have enough that makes us feel bad about ourselves. Faith helps us face it, deal with it, and then be strong without having to put other people down to make ourselves feel big. Scouts and everyone else, *humility* is a strength not a weakness, and it comes from feeling okay about being human and from learning to care about other people and respect them as fellow human beings loved by God.

We are all prone to anger and resentment, and we have within us something of the bully. Jesus calls us to a truer humanity of empathy and compassion. That does not mean we have to go around gushing pity or making excuses for harmful behavior; it means we learn to care enough to do what we can to work things out with each other, and it means we learn to take no more delight in getting the upper hand and putting other people down or pushing them around. Jesus did not come to make us superior but to make us human with each other so we can be human together as people loved by God. Amen.