

“The Seven Deadly Sins Today: Wrath”

Luke 22: 1-6, Luke 22: 39-54

Rev. Dr. Andrew McDonald

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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In 1962, the town of Centralia, Pennsylvania had one-thousand four hundred residents. Today, it has 10. Not only are most of the people gone, Almost all of the homes and buildings are gone. You see, in 1962, somebody unthinkingly burned some trash in a nearby strip-mine, and a subterranean seam of coal caught on fire. That seam of coal has been burning ever since. At its current rate, it is expected to burn for another 250 years.

The Centralia fire is not the only one. At Germany’s Mount Brennerder Berg – the underground fire has been burning since the year 1688.

In Australia, Mount Wingen has had an underground fire burning down in the depths for 6,000 years.

There are places like this all over the world. You can’t build anything on top of these areas: They will catch on fire from the heat. And smoky fumes seep up out of the ground that are toxic. Once the coal has all burned out underneath, the land collapses. Anything on top goes drops down into the sinkhole. Other times, the subterranean gasses build up; you never know when they will unexpectedly explode!

These underground fires are the perfect image for our seventh deadly sin: wrath. Wrath is a hidden, slow burning, corrosive, destructive, potentially explosive fire. The root word of wrath means, “Twisted.” Unresolved anger tends to distort the person, and relationships, culture, and leads to destructive, even ruinous actions.

Before we talk more about wrath, we need to make a careful distinction between anger and wrath. Anger is a basic human emotion. Carl Menninger called anger one of our “emergency coping devices.” It relieves tension. We express tempered anger to let the pressure off so we can re-engage the mind and heart.

The Bible has plenty of examples of anger. The prophets become angry, Jesus becomes angry, even God becomes angry. As Paul writes in Ephesians, “Be angry, but sin not. Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” (Isn’t that beautiful? Do not let the sun go down on your anger”)

Anger, properly managed does not disqualify us from being decent human beings, and, yes, Christian.

Think about different reasons why people become angry.

1. They care about something.
2. They have been hurt or insulted.
3. They are afraid.

Their person, their people, or their core values are perceived to be threatened. When the lever trips and we become angry, we know it is time to do something different, to speak up, and to act. If we use anger to move us to constructive action, we use it faithfully.

God created human beings to live in community. Living nearby each other, we are going to step on one another's toes. Anger is saying, "Ouch. That hurts. Please stop."

Open. Honest. Candid. Direct expression. We value one another. We will be fair with one another.

But wrath does not care if the sun goes down, because it is hidden beneath the surface. It is not open. Not honest. Not direct. Wrath burns below ground. Distorts the relationship. Collapses the relationship. Or explodes in some destructive words or actions.

There is an example in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This is a string of 21 movies connected to one evil character: Thanos. Thanos is the embodiment of wrath. A tragedy happened and not one had listened to him. Thanos never got over it. Thanos for the first 18 movies is pictured sitting, fuming, plotting, and planning. Gradually gathering power. Then, his slow burning wrath explodes as he kills half of life in the universe. When they all disappear they turn to ash.

Wrath burns and turns the world around it to ash.

Wrath is expressed in many ways. We usually think of wrath in terms of individuals, but we need to also think on a larger cultural scale. William Stringfellow wrote an article a long time ago that continues to haunt me. To paraphrase Stringfellow:

Wrath ends up being expressed in systemic ways,
having watched enough movies,
where violence is what saves people;
having played hundreds of hours of violent video games,
having seen war after war,
and having seen war perpetuated for year after year,
we come to take violence as a secular version of a doctrine.
that violence is necessary,
that violence is effective,
that violence is prudent,
that violence is inevitable,
that violence means security.

When these doctrines are repeated day after day,
people become programmed to believe what they are told.
They come to perpetuate a system of wrath.

We end up with the rationalization, motivation, inspiration that leads to an assumption of the necessity of violence. It operating beneath the surface: system of wrath. Always looking for an enemy to blame, to harm, to take away all of our fears.

I said that Stringfellow's article haunts me, because I am troubled by how I am tempted to be part of a system of wrath.

Dante's knew about what wrath can do to a person. In Dante's Inferno, you see what has happened to the spirits who have let their character be shaped by wrath. In many ways, it may be the most traditional depiction of the inferno. They find themselves on a vast sandy desert. It is so hot, the sand is actually on fire. Nothing grows there. Ashes fall from the sky like burning snow.

That is the standard picture of hell. But what Dante says goes beyond the capacity of any artist to capture. For Dante, the real burning of the wrathful person is not on the outside, but on the inside. Their own rage punishes them. It literally makes their own blood boil. So much so that their own tears burn their eyes, so they cannot perceive the world around them.

That is what wrath does to a person. In life, when someone's character is shaped by wrath, things that are good and beautiful are misperceived, misunderstood. Fuel for the fire.

What puts out the fire? Love. Sacrificial love. Not passivity. If wrath is the vice, the cure is found by at attitude and orientation toward the world based in sacrificial love.

This is what Jesus embodied. He confronted the slow burning wrath of his people, his culture, and his country. Practicing God's love does not mean an automatic inner tranquility. Nor does it mean the absence of conflict. Think of Jesus in the garden: he has a sense of what is coming. His love was rooted God's love. That is where he found the strength to love – the willingness to sacrifice himself for the good of those around him.

Love disrupts the system of wrath. It disrupts the false reality of wrathful power. This peace is about an intense striving that does not avoid conflict, but confronts it without violence.

Many of us who seek to be faithful have forgotten this, or blinded ourselves to it. Jesus prayed in the garden – an intense prayer seeking an intense awareness of God's nature and will. He models for his disciples an intense prayer in order to be intensely aware.

It is not about an inner peacefulness, nor an otherworldliness. The life of Jesus is an intensely alive person rooted in the love of God. His life is about changing the world through sacrificial love.

I am a Christian because our faith does not give us easy answers.

Rather, it makes us ask hard questions. I want to thank the House of Hope for sticking with me in this Lenten sermon series. It's not easy to hear about sin seven weeks in a row! But for over 700 years, Christians have examined themselves with the theological concept of the 7 deadly sins. It is, in essence, a way of thinking about character – psychologically, sociologically, culturally, morally and theologically.

It helps us analyze types of human behavior for how they affect us internally, interpersonally, and socially. It gives us an array of character traits to take a hard, honest look at ourselves.

In the Bible, People of faith are not perfect. In today's scripture we see the disciples falling asleep: Sloth. And soon hear of Peters bragging with pride. Stories such as these, if we open ourselves, can help us take a hard look at ourselves, and the systems in which we live.

The most heart-braking and the most challenging is Judas. He was with Jesus every day. He was trusted. What made him betray Jesus? Use the 7 Deadly Sins to think about Judas:

Sloth: he was too lazy to confront Jesus openly.

Greed: he wanted the group's money for himself.

Gluttony: he was more interested in his own stuff than using it for the poor.

Envy: He was resentful of Jesus being in charge.

Pride: It made him think he knew better than Jesus.

Lust: as we saw last week, is a wrong hearted love that turns to chaos.

But most of all, what corrupted Judas? Judas was embodied wrath. He is seething beneath the surface. Unresolved wrath that make him willing to betray his teacher, his friend, his leader, his Lord.

This underground fire explodes into this secretive plot. He waits for Jesus in this place of prayer, and capture Jesus. Judas is angry. He allows his anger to burn beneath the surface. To smolder. Fester. Grow. Until he betrays his Lord.

In Dante's depiction, Judas is at the bottom of the inferno, in the worst place: the level holding the betrayers. The betrayal of Judas meant he ends up a chew toy in the mouth of Satan. These deadly sins -- they chew you up. And it never stops.

But of course, as Dante depicts so well, these judgements in the Inferno are what we bring on ourselves in life. It is a dramatic way of saying: Look at your life. What traits of character are you practicing? Who are you becoming?

Jesus embodies a prayer that intensely examines his motivations, and intensely connects him to God. It sets him free to love with a world-transforming sacrificial love. He tells his disciples: Pray that you may be ready to face the trials of a world full of destructive temptations.

Judas betrays Jesus. He betrays God. He betrays the one who loves him. The overriding question of Lent is this: have we betrayed the Lord of love?

To remind us: our character is our destiny. It is not too late. It is not too late. It is not too late to change. Amen.

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