REACHING OUT

A sermon by The Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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Wellesley College Chapel

"But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment ... So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Mt. 5:22-24)

One of the most frequently discussed topics at this College in recent years, and already this fall, is the subject of apathy. As one student was heardto remark the other day, "Nobody's interested in anything!" People are apathetic about. College Government, apathetic about the College newspaper, apathetic about Sunday Chapel, apathetic about Academic Council, apathetic about electoral politics, and so on. At least that's what you hear if you attend any one of a dozen under-attended meetings on this campus.

Now it's probably true that apathy has been a problem for the human species from time immemorial. And it's probably true also that every community or institution suffers from one degree or another from apathy. But my antenae tell me something else is coming to the surface in the talk about apathy on this campus. It seems that you and I may be confronted with a rather particular, although certainly not a unique problem.

Why is it that people around here--and at this point I am thinking of the Town of Wellesley, no less than the College--why is it that people around here don't reach out to each other more than they do? Why do so many people, apparently, keep their problems and their compassion to themselves? Why is it so easy to be so apathetic about depending on other people and coming to the assistance of other people? This morning I want to suggest a partial answer to that question, and then see if we can begin to come to terms with it.

I.

It seems to me that an underlying problem now before us is not really apathy as such, but much more anger. And more specifically, not just as anger as such, but repressed anger.

To begin with, as Americans we have been socialized in a way that makes it extremely difficult for us to express anger. Whatever our skin color, whatever our sex, whatever our socioeconomic status, most of us have been affected by the dominant Puritan ethos of our society. From this perspective, "good people" don't get angry. This hearkens back to the medieval church, when anger was considered to be one of the seven deadly sins. And behind that whole medieval ethos we have the rather unambivilant statement of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: "But I say unto you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment."

This whole tradition of repression of anger filters into our particular situation in sometimes subtle, sometimes not so subtle, ways. The Wellesley community, both town and gown, as you know, is an incredibly polite community. I don't know whether this is true or not, but sometimes it seems that politeness is the most important virtue of all: that it's more important to be polite than to be honest, more important to be polite than to be compassionate, and so on. In any case, decorum and good manners are surely treasured virtues of this community, for better or for worse.

It's interesting, isn't it, that people seem to be bothered to one degree or another by the apathy of this community, but few seem to talk much about its politeness. Might it not be the case, though, that the problem is most basically not that we're too apathetic, but too polite?

II.

Consider the emotional histories we bring with us to this community, town and gown. The clearest case is the black community; clearest, because the black community is probably way ahead of everybody else in this respect. When you come from a history of lynchings, beatings, and systematic economic, social, and personal discrimination, by definition you come from a history of angry people. Until recently, however, a lot of that black anger has been turned inward, both psychologically and socially, a phenomenon astutely analyzed by Fanon. A people subjected to oppression, frequently punish themselves with with their anger, rather than by turning it against their oppressors.

A similar situation is now beginning to become apparent within the ranks of women. If, as is clearly the case, women innately have large stores of energy; if they, no less than men, are as a matter of course gifted with passion, aggressiveness, and physical, intellectual, and emotional strengths of all kinds, imagine how they feel--or, if you are a woman, just say hello to your own psyche--when they are systematically defined as the second sex, the weaker vessel, the submissive partner, or the sex object. Imagine! (Anyone who lives in this community, whether he or she is dealing most with students or most with the stereotypical suburban housewife, will require very little imagination at this point. Feminine anger in these parts seem to be very close to the surface, and a lot of it, too.)

If the situation is rather clear with blacks as a group, relatively clear with women as a group, it is mostly obscure when it comes to men considered generally, as a group. But think with me a moment about the typical situation of the male in our society, and in our community inparticular. The male has been socialized, generally, to "keep control of himself." It has not been possible for him to cry, nor has it been possible for him, asa general rule, to"blow his top." In the meantime, from an early age, he has been put on the treadmill ofsuccess: he shall produce more goods, publish more articles, gain more territory, constantly, or there is something wrong with his masculinity,'

The other side of the story is that the male has had to repress, for the most part, his nurturing instinct, his tenderness, his aesthetic creativity, and his compassion, which are his by birth, no less than the female's. Now, when you can't be what you are meant to be, you get angry; and when you can't express that anger, you probably get even more angry. That, I take it, is the case for many males in these parts. They are full of anger, but they have no responsible way to express it. To be sure, white males, in particular, have been the top-dog in our society, and in this respect they have expressed their anger, but mainly in socially destructive ways, against blacks, against women, against the environment. But that unconscious destructive expression of anger has not really left them richer as human beings, has it? It has made them all the poorer, humanly speaking. Hence, white males, no less than blacks and women generally, are squarely faced with the problem of anger, perhaps more than any other single group, since it has been repressed and so destructively expressed, as a general rule.

III.

We are now in a position to solve the riddle of apathy, or at least part of it: Repressing anger all the time, being polite all the time, takes a sizeable amount of psychic and spiritual energy. It's the proverbial story of holding the lid on. All the. steam inside wants you to blow your top, at least now and then. Meanwhile, the more the steam builds up, the more energy you have to expend to keep the lid on. So, people as a

matter of course will respond to each other with apathy. They're so busy holding their lids on, that they've little energy left to devote to reaching out to each other.

The answer to the problem of apathy, then, seems obvious. Learn to express your anger. Okay. But that answer covers a multitude of sins. Let me just sum them up this way, by introducing the famous concept of Herbert Marcuse: "repressive desublimation." Now this sounds a little too much like a very ferocious head-trip, but I don't think it is. By repressive desublimation Marcuse means the strategy encouraged by one-dimensional society to allow those who would protest against it to vent their feelings in unstructured ways. In other words, if you're on drugs all the time, there's very little danger that you're going to spark a sustained movement for political change. If you think the greatest thing in the world is hopping from bed to bed, there's very little prospect of you fomenting a revolution. Likewise, Lthink, for unstructured, haphazard expressions of anger. You can blow your lid all you want in the streets of Washington, D.C., but that's probably going to do very little to undercut the lobbying power of the Pentagon in Congress and in the White-house. In fact, the Pentagon is probably very happy you're out there in those streets, blowing your top, rather than working against its entrenched power in your congressional district. That's repressive desublimation: totally objectless, unstructured expressions of feeling, in this case anger.

IV.

So we should have an object in expressing our anger, should we not? Although it might cool us down for awhile, simply blowing our lids for the sake of blowing our lids probably won't get us anywhere in the long run. But before I go any further at this point I want to ask you whether you think I'm taking you far beyond the fundamentals of biblical faith. Which is an important question for most of you, I know, as it is for me. Doesn't Jesus say, after all: "But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment?" He does. But the question is, what does he mean? Is he here endorsing the strategy of repression?

That seems highly unlikely. Just consider one story from the Gospel of Mark. In the course of his ministry, Jesus encounters a certain man who has a withered hand. This was in a synagogue, according to Mark, and the people watched him to see whether he would heal on the sabbath. Jesus senses what people are thinking and feeling, and he asks them to approve of the healing. But they're silent. At this point, according to Mark, Jesus "looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart." (Mk. 3:5) Jesus was passionately involved with the man who needed healing, and he was correspondingly angry with those who would subvert that involvement. At another time, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus drove the money changers out of the Temple with a whip! Hardly a polite thing for him to do!

From these two examples, I think we can identify a rule of thumb for expressing anger, in keeping with the basic elements of biblical faith: Just don't blow your top any time you feel like it, but risk righteous indignation. This, then, is no longer repressive desublimation, but a movement toward what we might call liberating sublimation. Sublimate your anger, in other words, and do it for righteousness' sake. When you see someone getting a raw deal, it's okay to get yourself righteously indignant, biblically speaking--with the size of the indignation, of course, always corresponding to the size of the raw deal.

Now I say risk righteous indignation, since our tendency, I guess, will always be to be childish, to try to get our own way by stamping our feet, when nothing else works. It's truly an art sometimes to distinguish between feelings of righteous indignation and feelings of unrighteous self-aggrandizement. Yet at this point: nothing ventured is nothing gained. If you never take the risk of righteous indignation, you'll either have to bottle up your anger or let it out chaotically or destructively.

Righteous indignation, it almost goes without saying, is an important way df reaching out to other people. In this way, when you're on the mark, you're affirming their fundamental human rights, you're affirming their humanity, you're getting in touch With them as real human beings.

What about righteous indignation when you find yourself being oppressed or somehow trampled on? This is a more complicated question, since the old Adam and the old Eve will exercise their powers here perhaps more than any other place. It will be rather difficult to distinguish those times when your indignation is truly righteous, and when it's merely an expression of selfishness. But even here I think we'll want to say risk righteous indignation. For sometimes, if you don't speak out for yourself, if you don't love yourself sufficiently to do that, there's no one else around to speak out for you! Remember in this respect how impolite and assertive Jesus was to Satan in the wilderness. Jesus told off the Devil in no uncertain terms: Get. thee behind me! Jesus did it, of course, for righteousness' sake, not to save his own skin. That should be obvious.

V.

But this much is only one side of the biblical coin. Risking righteous indignation is important, but it's not the whole, thing. The radicalness of biblical faith may come to its apex right at this point. For, according to the Bible, you never rest content, with expressing righteous indignation, you always properly press on to reconciliation. Hence the other side of the biblical coin has this rule of thumb inscribed on it: risk reconciliation. "So if you are offering your gift at the altar," says our text, "and there remember that, your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." Go and have it out with your brother or your sister, in other words, but don't finally stop talking, don't break off the relationship, until you've reconciled your dispute.

Now what does this "being reconciled" mean? One way of looking at it is to think of it as a passionate conversation between two parties who are angry with each other. You explore openly and deeply the causes for your feelings toward each other. This is true for male and female, white and black, rich and poor. You lay bare your feelings before each other with a will to moving the relationship to a new place, where the feelings that now come forth as anger can more and more come, forth as trust, and even affection.

VI.

There's a catch to all this, however. The way of reconciliation is a costly way. It sometimes costs dearly to get to the point where the conversation can even begin. And sometimes it costs even more, especially in self-esteem, after the conversation has begun. In a deep relationship between a man and a woman, for example, you may have to bear the heavy weight of insensitive reactions to your efforts to be reconciled. Likewise in an interracial situation. The feelings of hostility may be so deep that each party will have to experience real pain, before any level of trust can be established. But the biblical point is to stick to it, to fix your gaze on the land of peace and justice which is your God-given destiny; and therefore to be reconciled now with your neighbor, even though it does cost you heavily.

I do not speak this word "cost" lightly. For, you know the biblical story. Take up your cross and follow me! There may come times, fortunately they are few, but they do come--there may come times when the cost of reconciliation is total. You give your entire self to initiate the conversation or to keep it going. I'm thinking now of the death of the saints, women and men like the late Dr. King. For them, the way to, and the course of, reconciliation meant the end of life.

VII.

Then comes the obvious question: How do you do it? How do you find the strength you need to risk righteous indignation and to risk reconciliation? When all has been said, each one of us must find our own answer for this question. But let me just suggest this one, which arises from the New Testament.

If you are seeking to be a Christian, to take up the Way and the Truth of Jesus, then it's always important to remember that you have in Jesus himself both the paradigm and the power for what you want to do. His earthly ministry forms the paradigm, the example, for a full life of righteous indignation and reconciliation. And His ministry in our midst by His Spirit gives us the power, or it can, to follow his Way. However confused and weak we may feel, in other words, as we embark on the risky course of righteous indignation and reconciliation, we're not forsaken. We have the paradigm and we have the power, sufficient for all the challenges and the pains of the Way before us, in Jesus himself.

VIII.

Now if you have been with me thus far, it will be obvious that we have not really begun to touch on the theme, reaching out. Actually we've been working with a lot. of important--very important, I think—preliminary stuff that we have to be sure about before we're really ready to begin considering the many facets of teaching out to each other, and to all our brothers and sisters. For this reason I'm very glad that we'll be coming right back to the theme, in our offering, when we'll sing our way through some of the dimensions of reaching out.

But I do think these preliminary concerns are decisive. What do you think about apathy? How do you feel about expressions of anger in a world of politeness? More than this, are you willing to risk some righteous indignation? And, are you willing to enter anew the sometimes painful quest for reconciliation? Are you? If so, we can sing an old song in a new way:

Awake, awake to love and work!
The lark is in the sky;
The fields are wet with diamond dew;
The worlds awake to cry
Their blessings on the Lord of life,
And he goes meekly by.