

“Break Out of Anger and Bitterness”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens
based on the theme, “GET OUT OF YOUR TOMB!”
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.
April 19, 2009

John 20:19-23

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Anger and bitterness are powerful. They are capable of great destruction. In some cases have even been used to creative purposes where the energy has been sublimated into positive outlets. But, in general, anger and bitterness are the engines that power destructive, disastrous, and often times evil forces. This morning, I want to say a word about that, but I want to focus even more on something more powerful than anger or bitterness.

Thomas Tewell says, “Every one of us comes to a fork in the road. We can either walk down the road marked resentment and retaliation or we can walk down the road marked gratitude and grace. It is a matter of focus.” Last week I talked about the woman whose anger and bitterness led her to believe that the smallest inconvenience made her life a “living hell.” But the more disastrous reality is someone who takes

their anger and bitterness and uses it to make others suffer a living hell. History is full of such persons who have impacted the world in large and small ways. The Hitler’s, Pol Pot’s, Idi Amin’s, and others use the fuel of anger and bitterness to change history for millions. In smaller ways we all know people who have taken out their anger and resentment on us for no good reason. Perhaps all of us can make a confession of a time when we have acted out of anger and resentment, too.

The real issue is whether these powerful emotions are driving our lives or not. That requires some honest personal reflection. It might even require some honest feedback from someone who cares enough about us to tell us the truth. These powerful emotions not only harm others they often fuel our own ill-health mentally, spiritually, and physically. Probably all

of us are aware of someone we know who has suffered a heart attack, cancer, or a stroke because of powerful negative emotions that have taken over their lives. Some people have literally gone to their tombs because of anger and bitterness. Others are living in tombs of anger and bitterness. They are locked behind large stones that they feel incapable of moving.

What I want to focus on is a more powerful force than anger and bitterness. We could spend hours illustrating the power of anger and bitterness, but that isn't good news. It isn't the message of Easter. The message of Easter is that God has the power to release us from the tomb of anger and bitterness. The message of Easter is that we can break out of that tomb and the power that can free us is the power of forgiveness.

In the Scripture this morning the risen Christ appears to the disciples and pronounces peace to them. "Peace be with you," he says. It is interesting to me that the next thing he does is send them [and us] out. He commissions them and us saying, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," and then he immediately grants them the power of forgiveness. "Whatever you forgive on earth is forgiven and whatever you do not forgive is retained," Jesus says. I see all this as being connected: peace, being commissioned, and forgiveness.

I think sometimes that people hear it wrongly as Christ is putting us primarily in charge of not forgiving. Mostly they want to be in charge of the "not forgiven" list. I hear this simply as

a description of the way things are. If we forgive, then that forgiveness frees us and brings peace. That is our commission, that is what Christ sends us to do, even as God sent him to forgive. I think it is more of a warning that if we do not forgive, sins are retained.

Remember Christ also taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins/debts/trespasses, AS WE FORGIVE...." So I think that Christ has given us the power to forgive, but I think we often assume forgiveness is a weak, powerless act.

Let me try to describe how forgiving someone does not leave us powerless, but actually empowers us. When someone has done something to harm us to that we react to with anger we often say or think, "that person made me angry!" The truth is that right there we have given them power we do not need to give them. If we "let" someone *make* us angry then we are giving them the power to control our emotions. If someone else can MAKE us sad, angry, happy, or anything else, then we have given them power over our hearts, and over our lives. Instead, the healthy, mature, and powerful way to live is to "own" our own emotions. That is, we need to realize we choose how we feel about things in our lives, even if it is in reaction to something someone has done to us. If someone has done something hurtful we are free to be angry, but it is our choice. We do not have to give them that power.

If I recognize that I feel angry, and I acknowledge that it is a reaction to something someone has done, then I

have a choice of how to respond. I can choose to respond out of anger or I can choose to let go of my anger and respond differently. Now this may sound like “psycho-babble,” but if we think about it, it is not only true, but also it empowers us in ways we may not have realized. It gives us power over our emotions instead of allowing others to control us by “making” us mad, happy, sad, or anything else.

Here is where forgiveness is a powerful act. If we forgive someone, if we choose to forgive them then we are taking back power over our lives. We are choosing not to be victims again to something harmful someone has done to us. There is an old legendary story of two monks who are on a pilgrimage. They come to a river and a beautiful woman is there waiting to cross over. She asks the monks to carry her to the other side. The one monk says yes and carries her safely to the other side of the river. The two monks continue on their pilgrimage and the woman goes her way. The monk who carried the woman notices that for days after his fellow monk does not speak to him except in curt and angry responses. Finally, he asks his fellow Christian what the problem is. The angry monk says, “you have violated our oath not to touch a woman. It is a sacred oath! In addition you have offended me by doing so!” The monk who had carried the woman across the river looked at his fellow pilgrim and says, “I carried the woman across the river in a few minutes and then put her down when we got to the other side of the river. It appears you

have been carrying her ever since.” The angry monk needed to break out of his tomb of anger and experience the power of forgiveness. Forgiveness allows us to retake power over our own emotions, and let go of other people’s burdens.

Forgiveness can also give us the power to let go of a painful past. Frederick Buechner, a writer and Presbyterian minister, talks about this in one of his books. He says, “Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll your tongue over the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

Thomas Tewell says, “Betty was a living illustration of Buechner’s words. Betty was filled with anger at her husband because of an affair he carried on with his secretary. The worst part of it was how she found out. The morning after her husband was honored by the Rotary Club for outstanding service to the community, Betty was looking through her husband’s desk at home to find an old photograph. Imagine her shock to find motel receipts in a file drawer from a local motel. When she confronted her husband, he confirmed the affair and rubbed salt in the wound by telling her that it had gone on for 15 years. Betty’s husband was not the man

that the Rotary Club nor she thought he was. Two weeks after Betty confronted him, her husband had a sudden heart attack and died! Betty was left with a huge beach ball filled with rage and resentment in her soul.

Betty told Thomas this story at a conference several years after the death of her husband. Betty used to be a whistler she told him, everybody knew that Betty could whistle like a songbird. But she hadn't whistled since she discovered her husband's affair and she would never whistle again. Betty asked Tewell how to forgive someone who had died. He suggested that she "write a letter to her husband and be honest with him about the hurt he had caused her." He told her to "write down the unedited rage in her soul. Betty thought this was the craziest idea she'd ever heard! Thomas thought he "had offended her because she didn't show up at the conference for the next two days."

The last day, Betty came into the conference with a big stack of paper. Tewell said, "Betty, you look tired."

She said, 'You're darn right I'm tired! I haven't slept in two days. Here's the letter and I'm going to read it to you—all thirty-five pages of it!' Thomas Tewell thought to himself, "There's got to be an easier way to make a living than the ministry!"

They went to the cemetery "and on a bench near her husband's grave, she read the letter out loud. The catharsis in her soul was punctuated by tears, screams and long moments of silence when she couldn't speak."

When she finished they burned the letter and Tewell said, we "watched her rage disintegrate into ashes." He offered a prayer for Betty and she said one too asking God to help her forgive. Tewell says he believes God answered those prayers, because the last morning of the conference, he "looked out at the congregation and my eyes locked with Betty during the closing hymn, *Amazing Grace*. Betty wasn't singing, she was whistling!" That's the power of forgiveness.¹

The tomb of anger and bitterness is small. It is tight. It squeezes the life out of you but it cannot contain you if you wield the power of forgiveness. You and I have a choice. I am not saying it is an easy choice. There is a difference between what is easy and what is simple. This is a simple choice but not an easy one. It may even take more than one conscious act of forgiveness. It may take two or two hundred but ultimately forgiveness has the power to help anyone break out of the tomb of anger and bitterness.

The gift that comes with forgiveness is the peace that Christ offers us. I pray that we are all able to break out of that tomb and experience the peace of Christ. AMEN.

¹ Thomas Tewell, "The Things We Dare Not Remember," #4707, November 16, 2003, csec.org/csec/sermon/tewell_4707.