

“Love and Rage” (30Jan22)
1 Corinthians 13; Luke 4:21-30

“Love is patient and kind...Love is not rude, is not selfish, and does not get upset with others.”

That familiar version of love commended to us, of God working in us, seems oddly juxtaposed with a reaction to Jesus: “When they heard this, all were filled with rage.”

The latter may feel a little familiar, happening too often these days, somebody getting ridiculously upset after hearing something, even scientific facts. But it's not just others; we look in the mirror knowing we're not immune.

Still, with Jesus it feels like this is the opposite of how it's supposed to work. Preaching ought to instill faith in people, turn them toward God, inspire them to love...shouldn't it? So what's the deal with Jesus' preaching instead prompting rage?

I looked up the word to see where else it's used. In 18 times it pops up in the New Testament, besides rage it's also translated anger, wrath, and fury. This is a loaded word, and it keeps intense company.

For a couple examples: in Romans Paul uses it to say, “for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury” (2:8). And to the Corinthians he writes that he fears he'll find on a return visit “not what I wish” but “quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder” (12:20). So much for love among the Corinthians!

In the book of Revelation, with over half of the word's appearances, it is frequently with the image of “trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored,” which may make some sing “Glory, glory hallelujah,” but I'm not among them.

Ephesians has it this way: “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and 'be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you'” doo-doo-doodly-doo Ephesians 4:32 (and 31).

Similarly, returning to one more from Paul in Galatians, in contrast to the fruit of the Spirit (“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,

faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”), our rotten term is warned against in the list of opposites: “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these” (5:19-23). Oof!

So, to return to the original point: how is it that preaching from Jesus, rather than coming to bear the fruit of the Spirit, ends up bearing arms and exactly what Scripture warns against?

To dig in to a clarification, Jesus is picking up on our Old Testament's greatest prophet and his successor, Elijah and Elisha (1Kings17, 2Kings5). In particular, Jesus references a widow and a Syrian. The widow lived on the coast north of the Holy Land, and as a famine progressed, she and her son fatalistically were going to bake their last morsel and then prepare to starve. As Elijah promised, God made that last morsel last many days. Doubly good, Elijah after that also raised the widow's son from death, in some way also saving her life.

The Syrian was an enemy general with leprosy. He was told to visit Elisha and wash in the Jordan River seven times to be cleaned. Indeed, he was healed.

So Jesus picks up on two stories, a poor woman and a mighty man, both foreigners. He's essentially highlighting he's also come for the outsiders, even the enemies, that that's how the Scriptures are fulfilled.

My caveat is: I realize Jesus could be saying he didn't come for his hometown at all but only for foreigners. I can't quite deal with that or go there, to say that God's goodness would be precluded for anybody, so I'm just going to avoid that conclusion for now.

But it's enough that his own people had a sense of special entitlement, that they wanted it for themselves. They thought of favoritism, having an advantage from proximity, that if God's blessings were going to overflow, at least they'd flow first to them, and the remainder could go beyond. So maybe it's like feeling “Jesus, you can be loving, but I want you to love me MORE.”

Instead of ancient rivalries that are alien to us, it's probably worth re-contextualizing it. If Jesus

had a foreign widow and oppositional military leader, maybe we picture a widowed Muslim Afghan refugee or a Black trans mother, or maybe God's blessings as particularly needing to reach Kim Jong Un or Vladimir Putin. How do those feel? Are you ready for Jesus to love and help those people, or getting enraged?

What if we need to update Jesus' sentiment to say, "I didn't come for you, but for the white supremacists and fossil fuel executives, abusers and anti-vaxxers." Would that make you feel a little angry, a little like they're not deserving of grace and love, that it's wasted on them?

It may not seem fair. It could be rational to be angry—maybe grumpy, if not quite enraged enough to throw Jesus off a cliff or to quit church. We may understand and begin to appreciate the reaction of his hometown audience.

But, to bring us back around, God isn't loving others just to make us furious. In a couple weeks, we'll hear Jesus himself invite us to love our enemies, as part of what Paul calls "a still more excellent way" (1Cor12:31).

We begin to glimpse that God doesn't operate in enmities and hatreds, doesn't abide by our rankings, that God's treading grapes of wrath isn't to crush opponents but to bear fruits of reconciliation, to bring us all together, to realize there are no outsiders, nobody left out, that God's overflowing love patiently, persistently, eternally will spread to all.

So what do we do, for our part? Maybe the Holy Spirit is already activating that love in you through faith and hope. Or maybe you feel you fall more to the rage end of the spectrum, than to abundant love. Then maybe you keep gazing into the mirror, a mirror not to feel self-satisfied and so loveable, nor to examine your own faults and feel unlovely. Maybe the most we can do is fix our eyes on the dim image of Christ in the mirror, recognizing yourself as one whom God fully knows, and knowing that you are maturing to be transformed clearly into the image of God who so loves the world, and you.

Hymn: "Although I Speak with Angel's Tongue"
(ELW 644)