

Messiah Moravian Church
February 12, 2023
Sixth Sunday After The Epiphany, Year A
Dane Perry
Matthew 5:13-20

SERMON:

TENDING THE WOLVES

In the passage we just read, Jesus addresses three relationship issues-- anger, divorce and oaths. I want to focus on anger, the one that seems epidemic right now. I am indebted to the writings of Lutheran minister Dawn Hutchins for inspiration about this passage.

Some days do you feel that just about everyone is mad about something? When I watch the news, my blood pressure and anger rise as I hear the latest foolishness of so-called political leaders or I witness the most recent massacre by some gun-toting madman or I hear of unbearable cruelty inflicted by one group upon another. Standing in a checkout line, one customer snaps at another for a seemingly minor or even innocent movement towards the cash register. Drivers tailgate, pass in the turning lane, pull out suddenly. Angry looks, gestures, words are exchanged. Is it just me being a grumpy baby-boomer or does the whole world seem on edge?

I am reminded of an old story attributed to the Cherokee nation that you probably have heard before. Even though Jerry told it in a sermon just a few months ago, it bears repeating, perhaps often these days.

One day a young boy says to his grandfather, "How is it you never seem to get upset? Don't you ever feel angry?"

His grandfather replies, "I sometimes feel there are two wolves inside me, fighting to tell me what to do. Whenever something angers me, one wolf is full of fire and wants to attack. The other is calmer, thinks clearly and makes better choices. But they're both always there.

And the boy asks, "But if they are always fighting, how do you know which wolf is going to win?"

The grandfather answers, "The wolf who wins is the one I choose to feed."

The angry wolves have been well-fed these days, and I expect great feasts will be served to them in the future. But surely I don't have to feed my angry wolf, do I? It is tempting to try to starve our anger; just turn it off, tune it out, pretend it isn't happening, walk away, enjoy a beautiful day. But another story about Saint Francis catches my attention. It's the story of an angry wolf demanding to be fed.

In the prosperous Italian village of Gubbio a wolf was killing livestock and attacking the people. Nothing protected the townspeople from the ferocity of this insatiable wolf.

The mayor announced he would send three of his best soldiers to find and kill the wolf. That night the soldiers met the wolf but only one lonely survivor lived to tell the tale. The villagers locked themselves in their homes and vowed never to venture out into the night.

Saint Francis was summoned to help. The villagers hoped that his way with animals could subdue the angry beast tormenting them. So Saint Francis went out to confront the angry wolf.

Saint Francis greeted the wolf as his brother, "Come Brother Wolf, I will not hurt you. Let us talk in peace." Something about Saint Francis's demeanor caused the wolf to stop and listen. Eventually Saint Francis learned that Brother Wolf had been wounded and separated from his pack. Even if he could find his pack, Brother Wolf was too weak and too angry to run with his pack. So he stayed close to the village and found easy prey.

Saint Francis invited Brother Wolf to accompany him back to the villagers to hear his story. Saint Francis explained that from that day onward the Wolf would be their brother and that they must care for their brother. If they fed Brother Wolf, then he would keep their livestock safe. Brother Wolf would safeguard the village. They must feed the angry wolf, and then they would find peace.

Two stories: don't feed the angry wolf, feed the angry wolf. As is often the case, both tales are symbolically true.

When we see atrocities committed against humanity or we see the destruction of the planet, sometimes what we might call "holy or healthy" anger wells up inside us, and it empowers us to act. Sometimes the anger of another person's indignation can move us from our carefully constructed viewpoint and urge us reconsider our position. Yes, anger has a roll to play when it is honestly employed in the work of love.

But when our anger results from excessive expectations of what we deserve or an excessive sense of the sort of treatment we are due, then our anger becomes toxic to others and ourselves. The American Psychology Association says quite simply that highly angry people believe that they deserve to have things go their own way. Maybe we shouldn't easily dismiss that definition as only for "highly angry people." I suspect at times it could just as readily refer to any one of us.

Perhaps toxic anger should be soothed rather than starved. Sometimes starving our anger is easier soothing our anger. I suspect that we often choose to starve rather than to soothe anger simply because it is less frightening. We hope that it will just go away. It isn't easy to find the courage to soothe anger.

How do we soothe our anger? I have a suggestion—gratitude. What does gratitude look like in these angry times? Can we even see beyond the anger? Consider this viewpoint offered by Brian McLaren in his book *The Great Spiritual Migration*:

"There is so much right with the world. The sun faithfully does its work, bathing us in life-sustaining energy. The moon faithfully does its work, lifting tides and letting them fall, and no one worries it will fail. Water faithfully does its work, the lifeblood of our planet, circulating from cloud to rain to stream to river to sea to cloud. Creatures do their work as well, filling the earth with life and song, sharing the gift of life through death and birth, through nesting and migration, through pollination and germination, each specimen a living miracle if we have eyes to see. Your body, a civilization of cells more sophisticated than any mega-city, works amazingly well amazingly

often, your heart beating, your lungs breathing, your eyes seeing, your mind aware.

"There is so much right in humanity. Children play. Adolescents fall in love. Young couples marry. Lovers entangle their limbs, breathe, and dream. Babies are conceived and born and nurtured. Through their smiles and cries they teach their parents to love in ways that those parents never imagined they were capable of. Friends laugh, plan adventures, throw parties, stick together, weep at gravesides after a lifetime of shared joy. Farmers grow, harvesters pick, transporters transport, grocers distribute, and meals of unimaginable variety and delight are prepared and eaten. Entrepreneurs plan and launch new ventures. Colleagues work side by side as managers seek to steer their companies toward success. Researchers seek cures, discoveries, solutions, understanding. Teachers teach and children catch the gift of curiosity. Most people are honest. They make promises they keep. People take vacations. They watch the surf, ride horses, cast lines, take hikes, swim, ski, bike, sail, and slow down so they can remember they are alive. Grandparents and elders watch all this, their eyes brimming with tears of joy.

"There is so much right in the world, and in humanity there is so much good. And so much beauty. When we see it, even a tiny glimmer of how precious it is, our hearts swell in gratitude and awe."

Gratitude, like faith and hope and love and commitment, are not innate traits that some folks have and others don't. Gratitude is more like a muscle that is strengthened over time as we exercise it. With enough practice, perhaps we can learn to choose gratitude over anger and leave the wolves in the woods.