

Wrath – Sometimes Necessary: Never the Solution

From the series: Heroes in Clay: John the Baptist

Text: Matthew 11: 3, 14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another? Matthew 11:3

...if you are willing to accept it, he [John] is Elijah who is to come. Matthew 11:14

Wrath is a word that we don't use often. It bespeaks a violent kind of anger, indignation. It bespeaks a strong passionate anger. When we think of wrath, we often associate it with the "wrath of God." We even use it colloquially, almost flippantly when we speak about the "wrath of God" coming down on someone. Why do we identify wrath with God? We do so legitimately because, both in the Old and New Testaments, wrath, violent reaction, strong indignation is indicated as that which, from time to time, God expresses. The wrath of God comes to expression most often through a prophet. Israel gave to the world *prophecy*, that speaking in the name of God, on behalf of God. Most often it was a word of judgment, a word that called God's people into account. The prophetic word reflected the wrath of God against all that was wrong, all that thwarts God's purposes of love, and of grace in the world. All that oppresses, all that exploits, all that dehumanizes calls forth from God a wrathful response. God is not all sweetness and light. God is not a wimp. God cares too much. God loves too much. When God's care and love and God's purpose for humankind is thwarted - the prophet tells us that God's response is wrath.

Now the prophetic word that announced God's wrath was never the last word. It was always a penultimate word. For it was spoken in order to elicit in its turn a response from God's people, a turning back to God in order that God may save. The word of judgment that the prophet speaks, announcing the wrath of God against all that is wrong, is a word that is intended to turn God's people in order that they might experience the saving love of God. But, nonetheless, that word wrath has a legitimate place in the biblical story. It is the other side of God's passionate love and all that stands in the way of that love elicits from God wrath - announced by the prophet.

John the Baptist was among the greatest of the prophets. John the Baptist spoke a word of wrath. John the Baptist was tough. John the Baptist was angry. John the Baptist addressed his word of wrathful judgment against God's people. The prophetic word of judgment was not often spoken to the world in general. Primarily the prophetic ministry of the Word of God which calls people to account and announces God's wrath is addressed to God's people, to the faith community that has failed to trust God and has failed to respond in the way of living to which God calls God's people. John the Baptist in his day rose up in the wilderness and spoke this word of judgment to the religious leaders. And all of Jerusalem and Judea came to him and heard his preaching. He was tough.

How would you like it this morning if I said to you, "You brood of vipers, what are you doing here this morning?" [Laughing] Tough word from old John. He never took Dale Carnegie's course. He didn't know "How to Win Friends and Influence People." John was tough. John was serious. John was passionate, and John was only half right. John was right and John was wrong. John was right in the words he addressed to the community of God's people at that time, a community that had fallen into a kind of complacency, a kind of spiritual dullness and decadence where religious service had become form and in many cases empty ritual and where the religious worship of God's people was not reflected in the life that they lived. John preached against the tax collector for exploitation and the soldiers for dehumanizing people, and the Pharisees and Sadducees and religious leaders for their blindness and their unspirituality. He was right about that and in so speaking he spoke a word of God, and the wrath of God on that dead faith community was a word spoken in due season. But John was only half right.

When Jesus appeared John embraced Jesus. Jesus was baptized by John. Then Jesus inaugurated his own ministry, and here is where we see that John, who was in many senses a prophetic hero, was nonetheless a Hero in Clay, for Jesus disappointed John. John hoped that Jesus would be the one to ring down the curtain of history and bring fire on earth. John hoped that the world had come to its end point, that soon the wickedness that so tore him up would be blotted out by the judging vengeance of God. He hoped that Jesus would be the one to effect this. John himself in consistency with his moral severity had the audacity to confront Herod for his immorality and was thereby cast into prison. And eventually he lost his head! But while in prison he heard reports of Jesus' ministry and what he heard he didn't like. Remember when the disciples of John came to Jesus and they said to him, "John asks, 'Are you the one that we are looking for or should we look for another?'" That's where you see the clay in John, the human error. John had a preconception of what Jesus ought to be and when Jesus failed to live up to that preconception John did not say, "I wonder if I've got it wrong?" John was ready to look for another one. He could not hear Jesus' word of grace. He could not hear Jesus' word of invitation. And he could not countenance the compassion, the healing ministry of Jesus. He was ready to switch messiahs rather than to question his own predisposition. He failed to recognize that, as a forerunner, he had brought only half the message and that his

message announcing God's wrath against all that was wrong, was only Act I in order for Act II to happen, which would be the announcement of God's grace that would embrace all. John was a hero, but a Hero in Clay. He had a true word of God, but his error was making it God's last word. Wrath is sometimes necessary, but it is never the final solution.

I find that juxtaposition of John and Jesus rather interesting for our understanding of what's going on in our own world, our society, our own lives today. Last week we focused on Samuel and we noted that there was a cultural war in Samuel's day. There were those who said to Samuel, "You are old and we want a king." But Samuel reflected those others who said that to serve a king would be to undercut the old values and the old ways. In Samuel's day there was the conservative party and the liberal party. There were the orthodox and the progressives and there was this great divide within Israel. So we noted that the cultural wars in our day are really nothing new - that God's people have always lived with these kinds of tensions, the things that are dividing us today in our society, the things against which fundamentalist Christians, especially, are raising their voice: questions of abortion and homosexuality and family values and education, etc. These tension-filled social matters that cut across denominational lines and faith group lines and divide people with great acrimony and create a polarization in society - these issues are not new issues. And we saw last week that God somehow or other is able to embrace the whole spectrum. God does not choose sides.

This morning as we look at John in juxtaposition to Jesus, I think we get another interesting angle on what is going on today. Let me say first of all something that you may not agree with, which is alright, and which I may not be able to express with great clarity, I am sort of struggling with this, but it seems to me as I experience what is going on today in contrast to biblical prophecy, the biblical prophets spoke the Word of God to the people of God. And I find today that the Word of God that is being spoken by fundamentalist circles is not addressed to the people of God but to the world out there, as though the Church somehow or other is a kind of a society of the righteous, and the world is a wicked old world that needs to be bombarded with the threat of judgment and hell. It seems to me that is to set prophecy on its head. If God is as Jesus reflects God, there is a great deal of compassion for the world on God's part. God is rather easy on the world. It is the people of God that get the prophetic word - the people of God who ought to know better. So, that's the first thing that I would observe as I think about John. John at least addressed the faith community. He addressed tax collectors and soldiers, and Pharisees and Sadducees, and anyone else who dared come within range of his voice, but essentially he was addressing the covenant community.

I wonder what John might preach to the covenant community today. I wonder if John would have anything to say to the fact that things in Muskegon Heights are so poor that 68 teachers are getting laid off and class sizes will get doubled, and

education becomes a joke, and the dropout rate can only increase, and the unemployment among young blacks exacerbates, which results too often in a reaching out for a quick buck through the passing of drugs - a temptation almost too great for anyone to withstand. I think John the Baptist would have a Word of God full of wrath maybe for us who sit twelve miles to the south.

Thursday night I saw *Malcolm X*. When I see a film like that, when I see the way we white people treated black people before the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s I could weep. It is treating people in a dehumanizing way. It is creating in them a slave mentality where they cower and where they don't rock the boat, where they take abuse. They were treating them with paternalism and condescension. Malcolm X experiences that and says to his people, "Don't turn the other cheek." And that word, diametrically contrary to Jesus, was the right word. I think John the Baptist would say, thirty years after the Civil Rights Movement, that racism is alive and well in our hearts, and our society continues to be divided and the people continue to be treated as less than human.

Time Magazine's cover this week has God and women - the story of the Roman Church's continued intransigence against allowing women into the priesthood and the Anglican Church's admission of women into the priesthood amongst a furious controversy. I think John the Baptist would have something to say about that. We are in the midst of a cultural, social revolution. The *Time* article (which I know is not the Word of God; nonetheless it is an astute comment on our social situation) calls the movement of the women in the Church a "Second Reformation," and points out that an all male jury of bishops sits in judgment as to whether or not a woman ought to be a minister of Christ. I think that some day we will look back on this whole period like we look back after a hundred years on the slavery issue. Again, there were those within the Church who were justifying slavery from the Bible. So often the Church, rather than being the avant guard, rather than sensing the movement of the Spirit, becomes the entrenchment of old ways, full of prejudice, and blindness, unable to see the nose on its face.

Where in the world is the world going, and where must the Church be are the questions to be asked of ourselves if the Church is to continue to be taken seriously as a community of the people of God. I imagine, just out of events of this past week, there would be enough fodder to keep old John the Baptist preaching along the Jordan for a long time. And it would be a tough word. It would be a hard word. He would say, "You Christian people coddle yourselves in your aesthetic beauty and wonderful ritual and you don't give a damn about people who are bleeding, people who are hungry, people who are dehumanized."

There is a place for the wrath of God to be spoken. But not out there to the world. Goodness sakes, let MTV alone; let Madonna do her thing. An old English professor of mine at Hope College had more wisdom than I did one day when I was complaining about the worldliness on campus. [Laughing to himself.] She said, "Let the wicked have their pleasure. They have so little." We get all steamed

up about all of the nastiness in the world, and we don't see the depths, prejudice, racism, and lack of compassion in our own hearts. Sometimes a word of wrath is necessary, but it is never the solution.

And now you see the juxtaposition of John and Jesus. John could serve as a forerunner, but not the answer. The answer came in the one whose coming we will remember next Sunday. Jesus full of compassion and full of grace. Jesus who said, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing."

For wrath confronts and may make you cower, may bludgeon you into submission, but only love can transform. Only love can change people. When we are angry we lose our effectiveness. Jesus was no wimp. He was every bit as tough as John the Baptist. But rather than anger that wished that the earth would be set on fire, Jesus was full of anguish, "Oh Jerusalem, Oh Jerusalem, how often I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks under her, but you would not." He came to the crest of Olivet and looked across to the city on Palm Sunday and he wept, and said, "If you had only known the things that belonged to your peace but now they are hid from you. And there will not be left one stone upon another..." But he said this with anguish, not with anger. I get angry. I get angry. Sometimes I would love to run from it all. Sometimes I would love to throw in the towel because it seems such a hopeless task. Anger is self-defeating and doesn't do the job.

Only love can change the world. Only love can change our personal relationships. Anger begets anger. Love melts. Only love finally can bridge the abyss of our culture wars. Angry accusation, acrimony and hatred only polarize and entrench. Only love can change the world. John was a prophet of God with the Word of God, announcing the wrath of God on my life when I fail to be God-like. It's not the last word. The last word is God's love that will never let us go - and keeps beckoning us to love in turn. God help us!