

The Sound of Love

Colossians 3:1-11

Home Moravian Church, August 3, 2025

If I thought it was an honest way to approach the Bible, I might preach on only the most pleasing texts; the ones you can find all over the Internet, superimposed on pictures of flowery meadows or starry skies; the uplifting words that ring like sweet bells.

But that's not honest, and it's not respectful of the Bible, with all its complications and contradictions. That's the reason I like to choose preaching texts from a lectionary. A lectionary gives us a broad experience of Scripture by assigning texts from across the Bible to each Sunday of the year. Some of the texts are quite beautiful: cue the bells. But sometimes, instead of ringing, something in the text goes: *clang*.

I think all the time about how our Scriptures sound. I worry that sometimes, people walk away from scripture because something in the text goes *clang*. I'm reluctant to repeat the words that might go *clang*, because I don't want people to walk away.

Take, for example, today's reading from Colossians—written either by the Apostle Paul or by someone writing in his name. It begins promisingly enough, with the ring of joy and blessed assurance. The text reminds us that we *have been raised with Christ*. The old self has died; the new self draws closer and closer to Christ, finding fuller and fuller life in Christ. We are encouraged to seek and set our minds on “things above, where Christ is.” And the last lines of the text assure us that in the renewed life there are no barriers of race, class, or religious ritual, but “Christ is all and in all.” Union with Christ at the top; union with Christ at the bottom; but what's this in the middle of the text? “The wrath of God.” *Clang*.

I think we tend to be uncomfortable with words about “the wrath of God”—except maybe when someone cuts us off in traffic, and then we may kind of secretly hope that at least a little wrath might fall on *them*. But honestly acknowledging that God might be wrathful can make Christians so uncomfortable that we might say, “Oh, that’s just Old Testament stuff; I believe in the *New Testament* God. The God not of wrath, but of love.”

That kind of talk suggests we think there’s more than one God, and also that we haven’t actually read the New Testament. From Matthew to Revelation, the New Testament makes room to ponder the wrath of God. Why? Because we give God lots of reasons to be mad at us. In case we need reminding, New Testament authors enumerate those reasons in what biblical scholars call “vice lists.” Here’s the vices listed in our text today, according to the New Revised Standard translation: “sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)”; “anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language,” and, as a sort of side note, lying.

Given that the text exhorts us to *get rid of* these vices, it’s clear that we followers of Christ have not “stripped off the old practices” as cleanly as the letter-writer had hoped. And because of these vices “the wrath of God is coming.” How do those words land for us: like a *ring*, or like a *clang*?

When Bill and I lived in the small mountain town of West Jefferson, on Friday nights a street preacher harangued the teenagers as they cruised Main Street in their cars. We lived close enough to hear him—he was really loud—and though we couldn’t make out his words, I inferred from his ferocious delivery that the prognosis for the teens was poor and involved a heaping helping of the wrath of God.

I have never wanted to sound like that preacher, because his words clanged with judgment. If you think people respond well to strangers’ judging their behavior, try it out on the

next person who cuts you off in traffic and see what happens. Better yet, tell the person that God is angry at them for driving like that. Imagine if someone said that to you! *Clang, clang, clang.* Would that make you want to stick around and hear more about God?

Yet Paul and those who write in his name are not afraid to talk about “the wrath of God.” They are not afraid to say that greed and lying are antithetical to the Christian life. Note, though, that however many words Paul spends on pondering God’s wrath, he spends more on pondering God’s love. Otherwise, he’d be just, you know, a noisy gong, or a clanging cymbal.

Within the loving context of the church, there is room for us to honestly ponder the possibility of God’s anger. And we should. Because a church that believes God cannot be moved to wrath must believe that God doesn’t pay attention. If we don’t believe God pays attention, how can we believe in justice? For that matter, how can we believe in love? Isn’t love itself attention?

If we allow ourselves to ponder God’s anger, we can ask useful questions like, “Anger about what?” That’s what New Testament authors are trying to work out with all these vice lists. One thing we learn from vice lists is that humans know a lot of ways to hurt each other. Malice, slander, abusive language. Sexual immorality—that phrase can clang, because it’s been interpreted so many different ways with so much judgment over so many hundreds of years; but it is certainly immoral to hurt someone by abusing them sexually. If abuse doesn’t provoke God to wrath, what will?

While I was working on this sermon, I thought a lot about these vices. I wrote them all down on little pieces of paper and then moved the pieces around in various configurations, asking questions like, “Can I arrange them in order of worst to least? Is *impurity* worse than *lying*, or is lying just a type of impurity?” I wound up putting greed at the bottom—not because I

saw it as the least, but because I thought it might be the *root*. I thought that all of the other vices in the list might, in some way, grow out of greed: greed for sex, which leads to abuse; greed for power, which leads to manipulation, which leads to tricks like slander, lying, and abusive language, all amply on display in our current society. The text defines greed as “idolatry.” Anything we’re greedy for, we have made an idol of. And the Old Testament, quite conversant in the wrath of God, shows God getting really angry at the people of Israel for worshipping whatever has become their idol. Idol worship is probably not as out of practice as we like to think.

In the Old Testament, the wrath of God tends to look like natural disasters: earthquake and fire. That has led to some unfortunate ideas about natural disasters. I still remember a conversation I had at about age 15, sitting on the Eastern Overlook at Laurel Ridge talking to a church friend. At some point in our conversation, this friend said that the reason “other countries” have earthquakes and stuff is that not many people in those countries are Christian. I utterly disagreed. I think I told her so. I *hope* I told her so. This was a chance to ponder the wrath of God, and I think Christians can do that together—so long as we ponder love as part of the conversation. Otherwise, it’s all just so much clang, clang, clang.

For the record, I don’t think natural disasters are manifestations of the wrath of God. But if the wrath of God doesn’t look like earthquake or fire, what does it look like? Have we ever actually seen it? If God has ever unleashed God’s wrath on the earth, why did it not sweep through Germany in the 1940s and set all Hitler’s prisoners free? If the systematic slaughter of six million did not provoke God to visible and effectual wrath, what would?

Could it be that God’s love is so strong that even though God *can be* provoked to wrath, God never actually has been? What if God, while very much paying attention, has continued to

hold out love over punishment, while we, over and over, have demonstrated our capacity to punish ourselves? Over and over, at every level from individual to global, the oppression, the injustice, the abuse, the malice, the greed that must certainly provoke God's wrath has been sufficient to bring disaster upon us, before God, who is said to be slow to anger, has ever turned from love to fury.

Maybe this is why this text from Colossians, while allowing room for God's wrath, exhorts us to get rid of our own. For us, anger and wrath are vices! Maybe that's because for us, anger and wrath tend to lead not to justice, but only to more vices: malice, slander, abusive words. Among our abusive words are often words of judgment. You'll know those words by the way they clang.

But you know what they say: If you're not angry, you're not paying attention? Nowhere in the Bible does it tell us to ignore injustice, oppression, and abuse. In fact, the Bible demands that we pay attention. And when I pay attention, I see a lot that makes me angry, and I'm not talking about people cutting me off in traffic. I'm talking about greed. Abuse of power. Starvation as a weapon. Oppression, injustice, abuse. How do I speak out against these things without becoming a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal?

Today's text from Colossians shows us that there is room in the scriptures to ponder both the wrath of God and the love of God. In the middle we're mired in vice, but the text begins and ends in union with Christ. Our scriptures can lead us to a place where righteous anger and love can meet. That's the place from which we should speak.

When righteous anger meets love, what sound does that make? Not a clang, but a ring. A deep, resonant ring, like the bell of our church. The ring of joy, and blessed assurance, coming from above, where Christ is. Amen.

