

The First Mennonite Church of Vineland
Sinning Like a Christian - Week 7 - Wrath & Love
Easter Sunday
April 20, 2025
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“Wrath - Holy Emotion or Hellish Passion”

Wrath is, perhaps, the clearest, most obvious of the Seven Deadly Sins. Theologian William Willimon calls Wrath a self-evident sin. It's a Sin that doesn't need a whole lot of explanation. It's anger, but to the nth degree. The poet Dante called wrath a “love of justice perverted to revenge and spite.” I like this description because it describes how wrath is more than just being angry or mad.

As I've read I've come to see that Wrath is more than simple anger, it's more than being mad. Wrath goes deeper, it's far more sustained, it is far more focused, and it's far more malicious.

The pairing of Wrath with the Easter weekend is no coincidence. To me, the most obvious example of wrath in scripture appears in what is read on Good Friday, the story of Jesus' trial, and eventually his execution. It's in that story that I see wrath most fully demonstrated. Wrath is on display on Good Friday.

When thinking about wrath and Good Friday, it's understandable that our imaginations might immediately go towards the Wrath of God. It is a popular way of thinking about Jesus' death and resurrection; that Jesus needed to die because of God's Wrath for Humankind's sinfulness. But today, that's not the Wrath I would prefer to focus on, there are many other, longer sermons to be preached about the Wrath of God. If we understand wrath to be more than just anger, that it is a perverted sense of justice, that it's filled with vengeance and spite, then I would suggest that in the Passion story, it's not God's wrath that we could or should be focusing on. In fact, I don't think that God expresses any wrath in the Passion story.

In reading the Passion story it is my firm belief, that it wasn't God's wrath that put Jesus on the cross, but was, instead, our own wrath. The Wrath of Humankind.

When I think of wrath and the passion story, I think that we really should be focusing on the mob, the crowd, the people as the ones who were wrathful. It was the wrath of the Pharisee's, who called for Jesus' death. Because Jesus challenged them, because Jesus threatened their power, their control, their privileged way of living, and so, out of spite, out of revenge, out of

their Wrath they called for his death. It was the wrath of the mob, who called for Jesus' death. The mob called for Jesus death, because they were disillusioned, upset and angry that Jesus wasn't the Messiah they wanted, and so they called for Jesus' crucifixion. And it was the wrath of the Romans who quickly, and without hesitation, exacted the kind of graphic violence against another human being that we dare not even try to imagine. It was their wrath, their disdain of the Jewish people that made such violence so easy.

So much of Jesus' passion story is filled with a vengeful anger that we would prefer to avoid, that we would prefer to sanitize, that we would prefer to not acknowledge or even deny.

The temptation of wrath is both in its denial and in its clouded sense of justice. By denying wrath, we deny our own capacity to be wrathful. By avoiding wrath, we avoid a shadow side of our human nature. The simple fact is, whether we choose to recognize it or not, we are all capable of being wrathful, vengeful, spiteful. We can easily pervert a love of justice for others, into a maligned love of justice for ourselves.

This is what the Pharisees did, under the guise of protecting the faith, they crucified God. This is what the Romans did, under the guise of protecting the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, they assassinated the peace of God. This is what the mob did, under the guise of not letting themselves be led away from their salvation, they killed their Messiah.

Wrath blinded humankind, and because of that Wrath, on Good Friday, it appeared that the wrath of humankind had won the day; that God had indeed be killed. The Romans walked away, with a known troublemaker dead, the mob went home, ready for the next day of the festival, and the Pharisees went to bed knowing that the blasphemer was killed. Wrath, it seemed, had won the day.

“Love - The Power that Defeats Sin”

Now, as we've reached the end of our series on the Seven Deadly Sins, and the Seven Holy Virtues, it is so fitting that the last virtue that we celebrate and also try to cultivate in our own lives, is the virtue from which all other virtues flow. Love.

The power of Love cannot be understated. Love can take on so many forms, it can be expressed in so many different ways.

In his letter to the Corinthian Church, Paul helps the congregation in Corinth understand more fully what love is, from the often quoted 1st Corinthians 13, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 13:1-8 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends.

It's this never-ending, forever expanding, ever hoping, ever enduring Love which Jesus embodied in his life on earth. It's this same Love which Jesus lived out, even to the point of death on the cross. And it's this same Love of God which brought Jesus back from death. This Love of God knows no boundaries in time or in space, it's a Love that goes to death and beyond. This is why our theme song for this series has been The Love of God.

Each of our Seven Deadly Sins have been perversions of Love. The proud, the envious, the wrathful, are all whose love is mis-directed. The Proud love themselves as the expense of others, the envious love what others have and the expense of what is right in front of them, and the wrathful love vengeance, at the expense of true justice. The slothful have no love, no passion, and care not for responsibility, and the greedy, the gluttonous, and lustful, all have an excess of love. The greedy intensely love wealth, possessions, knowledge, the gluttonous, insatiably love food, and the lustful, are consumed by an unquenchable love of the flesh.

But once this love is transformed and redirected properly, we find that ultimately all our virtues point us towards the call of Christ, to love God, and to love our neighbours, just as we would do for ourselves.

Our virtues of Humility, Temperance, Contentment, Charity, Chastity, Engagement are all variations of Love.

I know it's going to sound odd, but it really has been a pleasure spending these last seven weeks pondering the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Holy Virtues. I think that there is something that each of us can take away from this series. I know that I've been personally challenged to face some of these sins in my life and to cultivate more of these virtues. One of my big takeaways from this series, is that at the heart of both the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Holy Virtues is Love.

The biggest challenge for the church, I think, is trying to figure out how to live out the Love of God. I also think that it's the Love of God that is the church's biggest asset. We live in a world where people are seeking belonging. We live in a world where people are seeking something to fill a hole in their lives. We live in a world where people are seeking acceptance. From experience, I can confirm that it's the Love of God, which offers acceptance, it offers belonging, and it fulfills us in a way that the world cannot.

Anne Lamott, in *Traveling Mercies* writes that "The secret is that God loves us exactly the way we are...and that God loves us too much to let us stay like this." This is the kernel of God's grace and God's love expressed on this Easter morning.

God accepts us, and welcomes us just as we are, and through God's love, we are transformed. We are not allowed to stay as we are, because there is something inherent in God's love, there's something about God's love that cannot, does not, allow us to remain as we are. There's something about God's love which transforms us.

It's this Love of God, which we remember and celebrate today. Because today, this Easter, it's the Love of God which rolls away the stone; it's the Love of God, which pulled Jesus from the grave, it's the Love of God, which is more powerful than any sin, and it is the Love of God that is more powerful than death itself.

Thanks be to God.

Amen