

Sermon: Don't Get Me Started! (That is, unless I'm equipped with a GPS)  
Reading from the Old Testament: Proverbs 12:13-22  
Reading from the New Testament: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

On Monday, Donna and I had tickets to see the immersive Van Gogh exhibit presented at Camp North End. It is a fascinating way to experience such timeless works of art. While I had never been to Camp North End, which in its history has served as an assembly plant for Model A Fords and later missiles for the Defense Department, I saw the address was on Statesville Avenue and had a general idea of where we were headed. So, when Donna asked if I needed her to key it into her GPS, I said, "Um, not yet;" because don't you hate it when you initiate the GPS before you leave home, and it therefore assumes you don't know how to get out of your own neighborhood? I want to wait until I actually arrive in unfamiliar territory before the simulated voice tells me what's next. I guess I don't want the GPS to do to my sense of direction what the calculator did to my math skills.

Well, we make our way out to 77 toward the John Belk, and Donna asks if I'm ready for her to start the GPS. I said, "Not quite yet; I think I've got it." And I'm not so sure she believed me, because a bit later I glanced over, and it looked like a Google map was displayed on

her phone. This suspicion was verified when I took the Graham exit off John Belk, and she warned me, "It says Statesville Ave isn't for another mile." Aha, o ye of little faith! I laughed, "I don't think you trust me." She said, "Sure I do," but it was said it in a way that sounded like a CIA operative talking about an asset, "*Trust but verify.*" I smiled with confidence, while behind the mask of cool competence, I was praying that I was correct, because if not, I'd just be adding one more story to the family album my family will undoubtedly write someday. They'll call it *Father Fool* or maybe *Reverend Halfwit*.

Turns out, I actually did know where we were, just down the street from our good friends at C.N. Jenkins Presbyterian Church. We had made it to Statesville Ave without assistance, and then I say, "Okay, how about turning on the GPS now," even though we both knew it was already on.

Yet, it was time. We had arrived at the limits of my knowledge and experience, the border beyond which was unfamiliar and inevitably uncomfortable territory. From that point forward, I needed a map to get where we hoped to be. You see when you cross that border beyond your experience and knowledge or find yourself anywhere physically or

emotionally you did not expect or plan to be, and you try to proceed without map or guide, there's a pretty chance you are going to be lost. And lost is a place we would rather not be physically, mentally, or emotionally. Your composure is compromised by the quickening beat of your heart, your neck flushing red, your back perspiring stress pellets as questions, doubts, fears, and a polyglot of emotions exploit the cracks in your confidence. Is there a map, a guide, a process, a tool, a discipline that can free you from your growing dis-ease before you plow into disaster?

Of course, you don't have to go anywhere to be lost and it may not be Garmin that will help you find your way back. Typically, we do not wake in the morning planning to be lost in a strange place, or lost in crisis, or lost in anger, indecision, peril, conflict, or fear. You are walking through your day, going about your business, turn a corner, and boom; there you are ... lost, thrown off kilter and course by an incident, a curveball, an accident, a wrong turn, a wound, a mistake, an indignity, an encounter, an offense, a confrontation. Such occasions generate emotions, and emotions generate impulses, don't they?

Choose an emotion, say anger. I'll bet you have a *Don't get me started* list filled with all those irritations that set you off toward wrath. What are the impulses that anger produces in you? Actress Eva Mendes confessed, "I don't usually lose my temper, but if I get angry, it's true - I'm scary." Robert Ingersoll suggested that "anger is a wind which blows out the lamp of the mind." But you know that. Surely, when observing someone throwing a hissy fit, obviously lost in anger, you have heard yourself say, "He's lost his mind!"

The energy of anger is dangerous, isn't it? So, what do you tend to do with it? Get scary? Suppress it? Light the fuse and explode? Grip it and rip it? Or do you default to the Potemkin Village vocabulary of anger which consists of just two words: Nothing and Fine. What's wrong? "Nothing!" Are you okay? "I'm fine!"

Well, so much for putting away all falsehood because the fog of anger clouds your ability to discern the truth: the truth about yourself, about your relationships, about your world, about the news. The folks who run cable news between the hours of 8 and 11pm, and increasingly around the clock, along with the voices of talk radio; they know that about you, and they are masterful in exploiting that knowledge,

manipulating your anger as easily as a gardener redirects a sprinkler head.

To be lost in anger is a dangerous, disorienting, and very often disastrous place to be. Sure, anger can sharpen your focus and motivate constructive change, yet, with each additional step into anger's zip code, all that could be constructive is overtaken by the negative, and your world becomes polarized, misinformed, bitter, belligerent, and violent.

In Ephesians, the author emphasizes the urgency of unity in the body of Christ, the church, and how essential that unity is to its purpose and mission. He says things like: Christ "is our peace"; "has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us"; "you are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God"; "we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

In Chapter 4, the author stresses the critical issue of unity in the church. He says, "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in

love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." And with words that seem a powerful indictment of our current culture, he says, "We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." As with Paul's challenge to the church at Corinth, so too here in Ephesians, we are encouraged to see the church, the community of faith as a body, "joined and knit together ... working properly, [promoting] the body's growth in building itself up in love."

Can you see it? The author is methodically building up the theological case for unity in the church, and how that unity defines the church's mission in the world. Notice, he's not talking about conquest, bearing arms, political influence, power, elections, controlling the courts, or defining the nation. Rather, in Ephesians we are encouraged to understand that the best witness Christians can offer the world is how to live together in peace as we follow one who revealed that true power is living as those who know love is worthy of sacrifice. Or, as the author phrases it, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off

have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace." Our hope is revealed in our witness as we are "rooted and grounded in love."

In today's reading, the author takes us from a theological foundation to practice, offering the reader a to-do list that aligns with the witness of a peace grounded in love.

"Put away all falsehood ... be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil ... give up stealing ... share with the needy ... Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God ... 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, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

Easy right? Well, maybe not. We have here a simple list packed with impossible tasks, at least impossible were it not for what we read in Ephesians 2. "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ

Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

There is a Spirit we call Holy, that refuses to give up on a trigger happy, short fused, raging world seemingly bent on its own destruction. It is the Spirit of the living Christ, working in ways and places beyond our understanding through people, who may not even be aware of it, to diffuse anger with grace and conflict with community.

I don't know much about Heather Shaner, but I can sense the activity of the Holy Spirit in her work. She is testament to the proverbial observation that when people from opposite ends of the spectrum are fulminating against you, you just may be doing something right. Heather is a grandmother who has practiced as a criminal defense attorney in Washington D.C. for over 40 years. The sudden glut of defendants following the January 6th insurrection meant that local many attorneys would be appointed as counsel for defendants through the Criminal Justice Act.

Horrified by the insurrection, Heather Shaner was less than thrilled with the assignment. The first client assigned to her said he



wanted to invoke the "Constitution from 1776." When Shaner tried to inform him that the Constitution was ratified years later, the man told her he had done his research and she was incorrect. So, Shaner knew there was some room for education here. Throughout her legal career Shaner has used the novel approach of assigning books for her clients to read or movies to watch in order to grant them a larger context in which to better understand both the history and the issues that brought them to this juncture in their lives. She encourages them to write about what they have learned with the intention of helping "them learn about the past to better understand their place in it."

Like any good defense attorney, she seeks to find the humanity in her clients, discovering mitigating circumstances that may explain their vulnerability to misinformation or mob mentality. She has sent them dictionaries, novels, poetry and more. She's asked judges to grant them permission to have reading glasses. She's assigned them movies like *Schindler's List* or *Just Mercy* to expose them to injustices they may not understand. One of her defendants had earlier boasted that January 6th was the greatest day of her life, but after reading and seeing the resources Shaner provided, the defendant wrote that her eyes had been

opened to injustice, and she apologized for her involvement in the Capitol affair. She also sought a library card for the first time in her life.

A former federal prosecutor who has faced Shaner in court says, "Heather is petite in stature and enormous in spirit." About her efforts to educate her clients, he says, "This isn't a gimmick. This isn't like putting glasses on a defendant to make him look more studious." (Caroline Anders, *The Washington Post*)

Of course, in a culture drunk on rage and hostility, the worst offenders getting the largest contracts online, on cable, and in radio, all manner of critics from both ends of the spectrum got busy expectorating, accusing Heather of either representing traitors or conversely, force-feeding her clients reeducation propaganda. She is regularly dogged with emails and phone messages calling her a Nazi, a communist, or something profane. Yet, Shaner trudges on, saying that if there is healing and learning to be done, she wants to be a part of it.

"Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another ... Let no evil talk come

out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. 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, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

The Spirit revealed in Christ, even when we cannot perceive it, empowers us to approach the seemingly impossible with hope. Call it the Lord's **Global Positioning Spirit**. Lost in anger? We have been given a map, and through the grace of Jesus Christ, we have traveling companions right here to help us read and follow it. Therefore, let us "be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." Amen.