

Diffusing angry situations with prayer

By Elise L. Moore, C.S.

A staff of religious editors got a good laugh from a typographic error. The author was using the story of the three temptations in Matthew 4 to illustrate a point. But dropping one letter from the climax of the illustration created this inspired command. “Get thee behind me, Stan!”

Maybe that’s not such a bad thing to remember after all. In the original Greek, Satan literally means adversary or accuser. And sometimes it does seem that our adversaries or accusers have names and try to get in our face.

Confrontation has become a way of life in the United States. Instead of yielding at the intersection, it’s a race to see who gets through first. Merging on the interstate seems more like challenging other drivers to a game of chicken. Instead of apologizing for mistakes, accusations fly.

Perhaps one of the modern day lessons of this holy command is not to react to aggressive suggestions and behavior. If we put aggression behind us, it doesn’t escalate but dissipates. In fact the path in front of us becomes clearer and we walk right on with grace.

Many years ago, my boyfriend and I were spending a delightful fall day in a state park. I’d left him for a few minutes. On returning I suddenly found him in the midst of an escalating argument with some stranger. It seemed to be over nothing. (In fact, I never did learn the cause of this argument.) But neither one would yield. Each insisted that the other was at fault and became increasingly intransigent in his position. We were two seconds away from total loss of control and a violent fist fight.

As I approached this scene, I turned to God in prayer. The thought that came clearly to me was that being face to face with anger was the problem. We needed to rise in the strength of Spirit not rage in anger. I couldn’t be heard over the angry voices. So I simply took my friend by the arm and told

him we had to go. I don't recall what else I said, but I kept calmly talking to him and leading him away from the other fellow. The other guy's girlfriend arrived just after I did, and followed my lead with her boyfriend. We looked at one another and smiled. Hurling insults over their shoulders, the two men separated. No harm was done.

In an age when people are killed over minor disagreements, it behooves us to listen to Jesus' answer to aggressive arguments, "Get thee behind me, Satan!" Instead of calling the other individual Satan, perhaps we can think of this as how to diffuse anger. Let's walk away from arguments rather than face down adversaries. Let's relinquish the need for self-justification. Let's rise in the strength of God rather than allow the level of anger and confrontation to rise.

"Get thee behind me, Satan" can be a rousing reminder to put anger and reaction behind us. Sometimes the most effective manner to handle anger is to walk away . . . and leave Stan behind!

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