

Anger Management
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee
August 10, 2003
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POINTING FINGERS

I had a preaching professor who used to caution us against pointing our finger at the congregation. He used to say, "Remember, if you are pointing a finger at your audience, there are at least three fingers pointing back at you!"

That's especially true when it comes to today's sermon on anger management. Anger management has always been an especially difficult problem for me. When I share this with people, I sometimes detect a look that says something like, "What do you mean you have trouble managing your anger? Didn't you know that preachers aren't supposed to get angry?"

I wish. But, not only do ministers get angry, I can be one of the worst when it come to this problem. Now I'm certainly not proud of this. I would rather have a more mild mannered nature, but that's not who I am. When it comes to me, there may be snow on the roof, but there's still plenty of fire in the belly.

The question for me early on was how to deal with my anger. How could I express myself in an honest and open way without "exploding?"

Now I know that some of you have seen only one side of my personality and are thinking, "What is Frank talking about? I've never seen him get angry?" But, as an elder said as he watched me dig a ditch in a sand trap one day condemning the golf ball to perdition with every swipe of the club, "Well, this is a side to Frank's personality that I've not seen before!"

Anger management is something that I need to practice every day. And I know that there are many of you who recognize that you need the same kind of help.

But, what about those of you who think that anger is not a problem in your life? If we had pews that were more comfortable, maybe you could just catch a few "Zs" today.

Maybe.

But, I think you would be wrong if you thought that today's sermon does not apply to you. If you are pointing the finger at your neighbor, saying that this sermon is for him and not for you, I would suggest that there are at least three fingers pointing back at you!

THE MANY FACES OF ANGER

Anger is a problem for all of us. It just manifests itself in different ways. Sometimes, as when I was digging a hole in the sand trap, the anger comes out in an obvious way. But, at other times anger can come out in a less obvious way.

I have even seen smiles that were angry. Have you ever been around someone who ... on the outside at least was just as nice as they could be but for some reason you were not comfortable with them? I would bet that you were probably in the presence of a very angry person.

One of my favorite definitions of depression is anger turned inward. Unresolved anger can even make us sick.

The Bible has a lot to say about anger and how to manage it. And our text for today is a good example of the practical advice that can be found in the Bible on this topic.

Contrary to what some might say, the Bible is not just a theoretical tale about the joys of some great future. It is also a practical guide about how we should live today. In light of God's grace in Jesus Christ, in light of God's promise, out of thanksgiving we are called to actively change who we are and how we think today.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL

Paul's letter to the Ephesians follows this format of the theoretical and theological knowledge leading to personal and practical change. If you were to analyze Paul's letter, you would see that it can be divided roughly into two parts ... the first part is more theoretical and theological ... while the second part is more practical and has to do with ethics.

These past several weeks we have dealt with the theological and theoretical parts in chapters 1-3. Those chapters presented the mystery of God's grace and salvation in all its grandeur and majesty. In the first three chapters of this book, we saw a universal picture of God's love that lifts our hearts and minds to a new hope.

And today we enter the practical section of the book. In chapter 4 of the letter Paul says, that in light of this great calling you have received in Christ Jesus, live a life worthy of that calling (Ephesians 4:1) In other words, act like who you are called to be in Christ Jesus. Out of gratitude for this grand hope that is yours in Christ Jesus, become the person you are called to be.

It's sort of like what some your parents may have told you when you were teen-agers and went on a date, "Remember who you are."

In other words, act honorably because you are an honorable person who comes from an honorable family. Paul was saying much the same thing. Since you are a child of the king, since you have been adopted into the family of God through the grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, act the part. Remember who you are and whose you are.

Paul referred to this process as putting off the old self "which is corrupted with deceitful desires" in order to "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

Now on the face of it that sounds like an impossible thing to do. Who can become like God? It almost sounds blasphemous as well as being unattainable.

THE PROCESS OF SANCTIFICATION

But, it is a process initiated not by our strength and will power. It is a process of change that is daily initiated by the grace of God.

Day by day we are given the opportunity to make choices that are different from the choices made by most of the world. We can, by the grace of God, put on a new life like a person puts on a new set of clothes one piece at a time.

Because of what God has done for us Christ Jesus, we are not slaves to fate. We can choose, by the power of the Holy Spirit to go in a different direction.

The theological term for this Spirit empowered process of becoming more like Christ is sanctification. And throughout the Bible, getting a handle on our angry feelings seems to be an important part of this process.

Paul would not accept my excuse that I sometimes get angry because that's just my nature. Paul would tell me,

"No that's your old self. Now you must put that old way of living behind you and learn to live in a new way."

So how do we do that?

Where do we begin when it comes to managing our anger and living in a new way?

TELL THE TRUTH

It begins, first of all, with the truth.

In verse 25 we read,

"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body."

Jesus once said that you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. In order to be free from the problems that control our life, we must first speak the truth to ourselves and to each other.

We must quit pretending that everything is fine when there are great problems tearing us apart as a community. The very fact that we are all members of the body of Christ, the church requires first and foremost that we be truthful with one another.

Unfortunately, this first basic requirement is often not met. Because we don't like the truth about ourselves or our community, we often hide it thinking that everything will get better if we just paper over our problems with a sweet veneer of denial.

Recently there have been far too many examples of this in government and even in the church. Because a truth is hard to accept or doesn't fit with our image of how we would like things to be, we just hush it up.

But, this never works. If we try to submerge a difficult truth, we only increase the angry feelings and prevent the healing process from beginning. Managing anger begins with the truth.

DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT

But, more than that, we must do something with the truth. Some truths may (and maybe even should) make us angry. The Bible does not say that the Christian is someone who never gets angry. To coin a phrase from the writer of Ecclesiastes, "There's a time to be born, a time to die, .." and I think a time to be angry.

But, after we're angry, then what? The Bible does tell us that how we deal with our anger is what is really important. A time of anger is a critical decision point.

What are we going to do with this anger that we feel? Are we going to become bitter and strike out at others? Or, are we going to take action that will help us deal with our anger in a constructive way?

Many people who have been successfully married for many years quite often take Ephesians 4:26 as their motto, "In your anger do not sin; Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry ... " In other words, they will not let a day pass without getting things worked out.

On the other hand, couples that have problems seem to invariably do almost the opposite. They let "many moons" pass before they deal with the anger that they feel. And the result is often very sad and painful.

Whenever I hear someone say, "Oh, my wife and I have never have a fight, ever. We've been married many years, and we're perfectly happy," I say to myself, "Well, there may be one person in that marriage who is perfectly happy, but there is probably another person who is harboring deep resentment."

We cannot live together without things coming up that produce anger. Indeed, the more important the relationship, the more likely that we will have to deal with anger and resentment.

I like the way the NIV translates verse 27 of our lesson for today. Letting anger fester is giving the devil a foothold. Letting unresolved anger hang around is making room for bad trouble.

And that's why the body of Christ, the church needs to make conflict management a priority. Let's not kid ourselves with the fantasy that we will always get along just because we claim to be Christians. People can claim to be Christians and then do almost anything.

Let us be proactive in our faith. Let us be truthful about our anger, and then try to do something about it right away ... before it has time to deepen and become unreasonable.

So what do we do with those angry feelings? How do we deal effectively with anger? What should we take before the sun goes down? In short order Paul gives us a very practical way to deal with anger and live a life worthy of our calling in Christ Jesus.

FORGIVENESS

The basic Christian technique for managing our anger is called forgiveness. We are called to manage our anger by forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven us.

In verses 31 and 32 of today's lesson we read,

[31] Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, [32] and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:31-32 (NRSV)

Again, it's like we say each week as we repeat the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

If we could ever wrap our minds around how much God in Christ has forgiven us, we would be in a much better position to forgive others and thus lessen the anger in our lives.

We know that this is true theoretically.

But, from a practical standpoint, we spend way too much of our time thinking about and talking about how other people have wronged us rather than thinking about and talking about how much God has given us and forgiven us.

One of the side effects of our society having so many cell phones is that I have been forced to listen to other people's conversations. It's not that I want to listen. Their proximity to my position and the need to sometimes speak louder makes it so that I have to listen.

Lately, I've been thinking about how many of those conversations are filled with gossip and angry feelings toward others. People everywhere seem to be rehearsing over and over again the hurts in their life.

That's why people are so angry. They are unwilling to forgive. They wear their hurts like a badge of honor and faithfully cultivate them in the fields of regret.

Paul tells the Ephesians (and us), "Don't do that. As followers of Christ we are called to live in a different way. Don't talk endlessly about the hurts in your life.

Replace that anger and bitterness in your life with some positive things things like forgiveness and compassion and kindness."

The cure for the anger and pain in your life is not becoming self centered and mistrustful drawing away from people in an effort to keep from being hurt. The cure is to give yourself away to others trusting not in your own power but in the power of God's grace.

REMEMBERING WHO WE ARE

In Ephesians 5:1-2 we read,

[5:1] Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, [2] and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Ephesians 5:1-2 (NRSV)

There's that paradoxical truth of the gospel again. Only those who lose their life can find it. And only by forgiving others can we find forgiveness. We manage anger by remembering that as Christians we are called to believe and live in a different way.

ANGRY AT GRACE

Strange thing about the grace of God.

Some people especially religious people are most angry when they hear this message of grace.

Do you remember the biblical story of Jonah?

Jonah was called to preach to the people of Ninevah, a dreaded enemy. It took a "whale" of a lot of convincing, but Jonah finally did it. He went to Ninevah and half heartedly preached God's message. He said, "Forty days and Ninevah shall be overthrown."

Sermon over.

But, you know what?

That short sermon was surprisingly well received.

The people of Ninevah, "from the greatest up to the least," immediately repent, fast, dress themselves in sackcloth, and pray for God's mercy. So effective is Jonah's mission that the people are utterly converted and receive God's forgiveness.

But is Jonah relieved? Not at all. He is furious. Why? It seems that Jonah is angry over the mercy of God.

This is why Jonah didn't want to prophesy from the very beginning. He was afraid that his prophecy would have this effect. He was afraid that Ninevah would turn from its wickedness and thus be spared the just desserts of its wickedness.

God simply answers Jonah's outburst with a question: "Do you do well to be angry?"

Jonah then goes off to the wilderness to sulk. At first, God comforts him with the shade of a castor oil plant, only to leave him sputtering with rage when the plant dies.

Once more God asks him:

"Do you do well to be angry for the plant?"

To which Jonah replies in perfect character:
"I do well to be angry enough to die."

Jonah is indeed an angry prophet. He is convinced that anger confers its own righteousness. In a rage he is even ready to lay down his life for the sake of a castor oil plant.

In response God restores a sense of perspective. What, after all, is a castor oil plant beside the fate of the city of Ninevah?

And at the same time God contrasts the impotent rage of Jonah with the work of true compassion: "And should I not pity Ninevah, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

The story is not really about the conversion of Ninevah. The story is really about angry Jonah's conversion. Jonah learns that it is not enough to be an agent of God's anger. The true prophet is called to be an agent of God's love.

I think that we must learn the same lesson. I believe God would ask us the same question that he asked Jonah, "Do we do well to be angry?"

We may have cause to be angry ... maybe even good cause. But, does our anger really accomplish anything? And does our anger really help us proclaim the love of God that extends even and especially to our enemies as well as our friends?

Robert Ellsberg in an article on anger summarized the story of Jonah in this way,

"And so anger over some just cause can easily become anger against God, a God whose purpose is not the destruction of the wicked but the vindication of life in all its fullness.

There are many causes for anger in this world. But the mercy of God is not one of them. In our anger it may displease us to recognize that God's mercy extends to our enemies. The good news is that, angry as we are, it extends to us as well."

Perhaps that last phrase says it best. As angry as we are, the mercy of God extends to us as well.

May we really believe what we pray again today for it is indeed the key to managing our anger. May God forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
Amen.