

Be Angry, But . . .

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Text: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

If you were brought up the way I was, you were probably taught that anger is something to be avoided. It was bad to be angry, because that meant that you had lost control of your emotions or your composure. And it was also bad to be the target of someone else's anger because that meant that you probably had done something wrong, something that merited someone else's displeasure. At least that's what Mom told me. "If somebody's mad at you, it's probably your own fault."

In either case, the message was that anger is bad. It disrupts the natural order of things; it disturbs the tranquility of the way things are supposed to be. It can ruin friendships, or at least strain them. Anger introduces an element of chaos, of unpredictability, into our lives, and deep down most of us long for predictability. Anger can be uncontrolled, or even uncontrollable, and we love to be in control. When we get angry sometimes we can't even see things clearly. One of the signs of an angry person is the narrowing of the eyes, and the consequent narrowing of one's vision. And it's not by chance that an angry person is described as "seeing red."

Worst of all, for respectable Middle Westerners like us, when we're angry, we're not nice.

If you still have that kind of understanding of anger, that one sentence from today's reading from the letter to the Ephesians should be rather startling: "Be angry," it says, "but don't sin." It seems to be almost like saying, "Overeat! But don't gain weight." For many of us, anger, because it's bad, inevitably leads to sin.

But before we go on with this conversation about anger, it might be helpful to remember where we have been with Paul in his letter to the church in Ephesus. (This is a review of recent sermons in case you haven't figured that out.) The letter begins with that grand vista of God's plan for humanity, a plan that puts Jesus at the center of the unfolding drama of our salvation, our redemption. The climax of this drama is our reconciliation with God and our reunion with each other, dismantling the walls of division among us and between us and God. If the crucified and risen Christ is the central figure in this unfolding plan, then the church, the body of Christ, becomes the prime mover in salvation history after Christ's ascension. The church is what pushes the drama toward its conclusion. Because there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, the church also must be one, united in its witness to God's undying love for us, which was last week's lesson from Ephesians. There! Three sermons rolled into one!

And now, in today's passage, we're getting down to the nitty-gritty. Enough for the big picture, for now at least. From grand vision we turn to the pragmatic. How do we do it? How do we live into God's plan; how do we behave toward each other in ways that are faithful, in ways that will build up the church? What does Christian life look like?

Most of what Paul tells us in today's passage from Ephesians is relatively unsurprising—it's the staple of what we've been taught. We are to be truthful; we are not to steal; we're not to say bad things about each other. We are to be imitators of God, and we can do that by following in the way of Jesus, who was God incarnate, God in the flesh, among us.

But what stands out for me in today's passage is this thing about anger. "Be angry, but don't sin." It's not a conditional kind of statement—"Well, if you *must* be angry, at least don't sin"—it's an imperative. "Be angry!" We're told that we should be angry!

And maybe this actually shouldn't be so surprising. After all, Jesus got angry. He was angry, really angry, when he purged the temple of the money-changers. He got especially angry when he ran into hypocrisy among religious leaders, or when he sensed that religion was being used not to bring people to God, but to try to exclude people from God's love and grace. In the third chapter of the Gospel of Mark, we read that on the

Sabbath Jesus encountered a man with a withered hand in the synagogue. Jesus knew that the religious authorities were waiting, just waiting, to pounce on him if he, in their eyes, violated the Sabbath by healing this man with the withered hand. When he went ahead and healed the man, and was criticized by the religious leaders, Mark reports that Jesus looked around at them with anger, and that he was grieved at their hardness of heart.

This kind of anger was entirely appropriate in Jesus' eyes, and it's entirely appropriate for us. Anger, in fact, can be a gift of God. The right kind of anger is a sign that we're morally alive, that we have a sense of justice, and an ability to feel someone else's injustice. Such anger tells us and others that we have a conscience, that the inhumanity of our times hasn't dulled our ability to be outraged by wrong. Anger is a sign of our humanity in the best sense.

Hardness of heart, religious hypocrisy, making a mockery of the faith by exploiting it for personal and material gain, converting the Sabbath from being God's gift to humanity to making it a burden for people—these were the things that provoked Jesus' anger. Jesus' anger was never about the way Jesus himself was treated. During the events of what we call Holy Week, when he was betrayed and deserted even by his closest friends, even when he suffered unbearably on the cross, Jesus showed no anger toward those wayward friends who had abandoned him, nor toward the religious and political authorities who condemned him, nor toward the lynch mob that called for his execution. Indeed, on the cross, he prayed for God's forgiveness for all of those who tortured and killed him.

When Jesus got angry, it was always on behalf of other people, the victims of injustice, or when he saw God's love thwarted by the very people who wore religion on their sleeve.

So be angry. Be angry at injustice when you see it. Be angry that there are people who live in the richest nation in the world and yet go hungry. Be angry when people are denied decent medical care because they live in the wrong place or don't make enough money. Be angry when children are separated from their parents on our behalf. Be angry when you see our beautiful and precious environment, God's gift to all of us, being pillaged and polluted for the sake of the profit of a few. Be angry when you see religion

being used to condemn whole classes of people, when our faith in God should be a blessing. We may not agree in our analysis of why there is inequity and iniquity, but we should be one in being disturbed by them. Be angry! It means that we're alive!

But do not sin. Every Sunday we confess our sins, but my guess is that what we are mostly thinking about when we talk about sin is the individual sin, the individual instance of rule-breaking. But such sins are really products or manifestations of a condition, something deep in us, something that makes us human, and not divine. The Latin phrase, *errare humanum est* is usually translated as “to err, or to sin, is human.” As in, “I’m only human.” And, of course, the rest of the wisdom is “and to forgive is divine.” But what the Latin really means is that it is in our nature to stray, to sin. And it is in God’s nature to forgive. Sin is the alchemy that turns what can be good qualities into bad ones. It’s the alchemy that transforms healthy desire into unloving lust; enjoyment of life into hedonism; justified anger into rage and hatred. While we should strive to avoid sin, and while we should do our best to imitate God in forgiving others, as Paul tells us to do in this letter, we can never completely escape our own nature, our own sinfulness. It’s part of who we are. In fact one of our most basic sins is our self-centered belief that we’re somehow different, that we can play God--that we are the great exception to human sinfulness.

So, when Paul tells us to be angry, he isn’t talking about destructive anger, like road rage, or the hatred that is really a mutation of anger, he is telling us to be angry in the way Jesus was angry. When he says that we shouldn’t sin in our anger, he is saying that our anger should be rooted in love, not in judgment. It was Jesus’ love for the victim, the man with the withered hand, that prompted his anger at the Pharisees, but even that anger never degenerated into rage or hatred. In the end, Jesus’ anger at the Pharisees was rooted in his love for them, and in the profound sadness he felt when he saw them, in the name of religion, playing God, denying God’s gift of healing to another human being in the name of serving God. Jesus saw them as victims of their own narrow understanding of God’s love.

So, be angry, but let your anger be rooted in love, not in hatred. Do not sin. Speak the truth in love, not to tear down, but to build up, as Paul says in Ephesians. And don't let the sun go down on your anger. Don't become obsessed by it; don't let it get in the way of your ability to love and to forgive someone else or yourself.

Be angry, but be angry for the right reasons, and forgive even what seems at the time to be the unforgivable. For we are to be imitators of Jesus, who loved even those who persecuted and eventually executed him. We are to imitate Jesus, whose very life was a testimony to God's love poured out for us; Jesus, in whose name we were baptized, when we were marked forever by God's love, a love that conquers all sin.

So, as Ephesians tells us, "Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Amen.