

## *Anger acknowledged and affirmed*

*Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:22-5:2*

I wonder, why do we even try to hide our true feelings and our true selves from God? For God knows our hearts, minds and spirits and takes our pain and suffering, fears and anger seriously. Paul, in today's scripture, is calling faithful followers of Christ to imitate God. To make choices that actually help, rather than harm. To strive to live according to the values of Christ and of God. Paul is reminding the Ephesians in this letter and all of us that through Christ we have been set free from our past mistakes and wrong decisions. We are being forgiven, and God is inviting us into a new way of life. A new way of living. Paul is actually writing to the people who are already followers of Christ.

When I read this for the first time this week, I thought to myself, "You know, I should write myself a sticky note and place it on my mirror." I want to be reminded each moment when I wake up of the following call, when Paul wrote: "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath, anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you." How would your day be changed if that was the first thing you read before you walked out of your bathroom, into the world? Would that change how you approach other people?

As faithful followers, we strive like Jesus to live in peace. We seek to stand in the face of oppression by turning the other cheek with the spirit of forgiveness and compassion for all people. This is not an easy task. This is not something that the news or social media like to focus our attention on – especially during the leadup to elections, for example. Instead, they like to find the salacious. They try to find conflict because that's what they think draw our attention. But Paul recognizes that as humans, there are things that are going to trigger us. There are things that will make us angry. When someone is treated unfairly, we get mad. When someone mistreats us, our response is usually anger. Anger truly is a powerful emotion.

Brené Brown, who speaks a lot about mental health and wellness, defined anger as the following:

"Anger is an emotion when we feel that something gets in the way of a desired outcome, or when we believe there is violation of the way things should be. It is an action emotion which causes us to want to do something when we feel it."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brené Brown, **Atlas of the Heart**, (New York: Random House, 2021), p. 220.

Take a moment: how do you deal with your anger when it bubbles up in your body? I remember working at a camp with some teenagers who have an abundance of anger. Taking them out to a school field where there was an abundance of apples that had fallen from a tree, and inviting them to throw those apples at a fence, as a way of letting go of some of the anger that was bubbling up, in order for the anger to be in a place where we can actually deal with what was going on. What is it you do to deal with your anger? I personally love kickboxing; the sound of hitting something sounds really great. The question today again is: what do you do with your anger? What is Paul inviting us to do with our anger? Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, states clearly that anger itself is not a bad thing. In fact, he proclaims that it's okay to be angry, as long as you don't let the sun go down on your anger. What does Paul mean by this?

If any of you have ever been to a wedding – and I've been to many – inevitably, at the reception, you will hear one of the parents of the bride or groom say, "Whatever you do, the key to a successful marriage is to not go to sleep angry." There is a lot of truth to this. Why is that? Paul points out that anger can quickly turn to hatred and resentment. When it turns to this, it becomes rooted in one's heart, where it can fester, and it can become increasingly difficult to repress. Repressed anger has a habit of being taken out on the people that we most love, or the people who just happen to cross our path at the wrong moment. Repressed anger is most often lived out in the forms of blaming and nagging, cynicism. Accusing hostility, even sulking. Paul reminds us that what we are called to do, and what Jesus is calling us to do, is to put away all the bitterness, wrath, slander, and malice.

We can take notes from the psalmist today, who cries out to God from the depth of his pain and sorrow. The psalmist does not let the anger build up and fester. Instead, the psalmist chooses to give it to God. Takes his anger and laments it to God. It may at first sound like someone was complaining. Stephen Farris, who was my homiletics professor, explained it in this way:

"The psalmist cries out to God, and what makes the psalm remarkable, is that in pain, the psalmist addresses God; in complaint, one grumbles about God; but in lament, one cries out to God. That kind of cry is an expression of profound faith. A faith that says that God is present; that God hears us; that God is able and willing to act in our lives."<sup>2</sup>

So be angry. Anger can be passion, can help to make change in this world. But remember not to hold onto it, not to wear it like a badge of honor. Instead cry out to God and come to experience hope. Keep crying out to God, for it is a profound expression of faith, and it is truly a sign of trust.

If we listen to the psalm again, you'll see that the psalmist doesn't linger all that long on pain and suffering. The psalmist doesn't let the sun go down on his anger. In fact, both readings have a lot of hope in them. Even through they begin from a place of pain and longing, by the end, the people are lifted up and encouraged. They have a new path forward that comes with hope. They receive the promise of steadfast love and forgiveness. Paul's key message today is one

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Farris, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 2, p. 131.

that I think we all need to ponder: how do we stop making room for the devil in our lives? How do we address our anger so that our reaction to it does not lead to wrath or seeking revenge? How do we use our anger instead to build up one another?

I was struck this week by the actions in the Olympics by Simone Biles. Amazing American gymnast. Who in the last Olympic games, withdrew from the competition and was faced with criticism because it didn't look like there was anything wrong with her – at least not physically wrong with her. She came out very strong about how important it was for her to work on her mental health. And though it is not as visible, it is just as important, for one can really hurt themselves if their mind isn't centered as they are doing the kinds of things that she was doing on the balance beam, or the floor, or the bars. Some people considered her weak for doing this. Somehow, Simone found these Olympics – so after taking that hiatus and coming back – she found a way instead of lashing out at the commentators and the people who were her haters (I kind of wanted to use Taylor Swift's song: "The haters gonna hate, hate, hate, we're just going to shake it off", but I won't torture you with the whole song)...instead what she did, she did not only supported her fellow gymnasts from the States, she could be heard cheering for all of the athletes as they were doing their routine. Encouraging them, hoping they would do their very best.

Like her, Sarah Mitton, who was the Canadian shot putter, was also role modelling kindness and tender-heartedness, even after she had the most disappointing final. She didn't even come close to showing what she was capable of. But in that time, in her sadness, she didn't let the anger consume her and instead was hugging and supporting other people and congratulating them on what they were able to achieve. In my mind, both athletes role modelled what Paul was speaking about. So what gave them the strength to resist making room for the devil, sinning, making a choice that would harm someone else? As faithful followers, we are being told that the best way to resist this is to reach out to God. To make room for hope.

It is fairly well-known that if we help others, we tend to end up helping ourselves at the same time. This passage from Paul speaks to the ministry of pastoral care. We are being called to care for one another; to be in relationship with one another, and while in relationship, we are called to speak truthfully. Paul isn't telling us to be nice. Paul is telling us to be truthful and kind. I do believe there is a difference. I believe that we all long to be the best Christians we can be. We want to be loving and forgiving, and we don't always live up to this goal. It is okay to be angry with one another. But I believe that what we need to remember is how we act on this anger. We don't want to tear down our community, but we want to build each other up.

One of the most harmful things in a community of faith is gossip. Gossip, in the beginning wasn't a bad thing. In fact, it was sibling of God; it was a way that we shared our stories with one another. But the kind of gossip that we hear nowadays – and it can happen in our families, it can happen in workplaces, it can happen within this community of faith – are the types of conversations where we go out to the parking lot and talk about somebody without talking directly to them. Triangulation is one of the most harmful things that can happen in any community. We need to learn to go directly to the people and speak the truth; not out of anger, but in a way that expresses what is actually going on.

I have experienced some amazing moments of healing and transformation when I personally have been able to express my anger and disappointment in a way that was kind and in a way where the other person was able to hear it. I have also experienced healing and transformation when others have been able to come directly to me and share with me what it is I have done that has hurt them. We need to talk to one another.

Rabbi Harold Kushner says: "A sin is a missed opportunity to act humanly." That's what God is calling us to do, is the act humanly with one another. We can't just stuff away our emotions; they're there. So let's use them for the power of good. To bring about change and transformation. For Jesus has taught us over and over again that we need to treat others the way we deserve to be treated. I am honestly okay if someone is angry at me, as long as they come directly to me and tell me why. I can be angry with someone, and I can still love them. As a youth minister, one of the most powerful statements I have ever had with youth was to tell them I was disappointed. They're like, "You're mad at me." "No, I'm disappointed. Because what I believed you would do is not what you did. And I know that you are a good person, and I love you." In those moments, the change was amazing.

To imitate God means that we are being asked to focus our attention on actions that flow from God's character. So what actions are worthy of imitating? God loves us unconditionally, so we too are called to love one another unconditionally. I hope that Paul has inspired all of us to not shy away from our anger, but instead to use it in the power of goodness, where we can challenge one another, hold one another accountable for the good of all as we strive for peace, acceptance, compassion, and love in this world. Amen.