

“Be Angry But Do Not Sin”

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

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Reverend Christine Chakoian

First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, Illinois

Anger has a place in the Christian life

As Christians we're supposed to be “nice,” right? We're supposed to be calm, compassionate, unruffled, and kind. Which means we're not supposed to get angry.

Or are we? This is St. Paul's advice in today's Scripture lesson: “Be angry, but do not sin.” This may sound absurd, but I think it is true: anger can help us be better Christians. Today I want to think about anger's rightful place in the Christian life.

Anger, like pain, is a signal that something's wrong

“Anger is a signal, and one worth listening to,” writes noted psychologist Harriet Goldhor Lerner.¹ In fact, anger is a very valuable emotion. It's not comfortable, it's not pretty, but it is valuable nevertheless – in much the same way pain is a valuable feeling.

Think about it. Without pain, we would not know to keep our hands off a hot stove. Without pain, we wouldn't know that our ankle is sprained or our appendix ready to burst. Without pain, we wouldn't know that our hearts are literally or figuratively broken. Pain is never pleasant – but it is necessary for our well-being. And woe to the person who ignores it.

Like pain, anger tells us things – and we'd be fools not to pay attention. But because we're in the habit of denying our anger, we're much less likely to listen to its message. That's a shame. Because just like pain, anger is a signal that something's very wrong. And, like pain, it's just a signal, and, the right diagnosis makes all the difference. Otherwise you're just treating the symptom without treating the source.

Listening to anger: consider the source

So what might anger be telling you? Anger's message is often tricky to sort out. One reason is that it has the peculiar characteristic of hiding other

feelings. Technically it's known as a "secondary emotion." Pastor John Ortberg in his book *Everybody's Normal Till You Get To Know Them* – isn't that the best title? Ortberg explains it this way: just like you learned in grade school that red, yellow and blue are primary colors and other colors are made by mixing them – so also, anger is a blend of other feelings. Behind the anger are the "primary colors" of things like fear and frustration, hurt and shame.²

At its most basic level, anger often rises as a response to threat. In the trilogy of responses we humans have to danger - "fight, flight, or freeze" - "fight" is that adrenalin-laden, stomach-clenching, teeth-grinding, nostril-flaring response reaction of anger. So the first question to ask when we're feeling angry is "what is being threatened?" Sometimes it is a physical threat: the literal fist to the stomach. But the danger need not be physical for us to react physically. The feeling of being socked in the stomach is just as real when our pride or ego is wounded.

Sometimes it's obvious what's being threatened. Other times, not so much. Just the other day I found myself screaming at my computer because I couldn't figure out how to make it do something. I was really worked up – far more worked up than appropriate to the situation. My overreaction led me to wonder what was *really* going on. It took me just a few minutes to realize that I was feeling deeply embarrassed at something that had happened earlier in the day – something else that had left me feeling incompetent and stupid, and that had cost me dearly. I don't know about you, but for me, the feeling of incompetence still triggers all those horrid Junior High feelings – that everyone else knows what's going on and you're the only one who doesn't know. Not logical, right? But when that light bulb goes on about what's *really* behind the anger, it is much, much easier to let it go.

Or to deal with it straightforwardly. Sometimes anger is a reaction to a genuine threat to something we hold dear. Dr. Lerner reminds us:

Our anger may be a message that we are being hurt, that our rights are being violated, that our needs ... are not being adequately met, or simply that something is not right. Our anger may tell us that ... that too much of

our self – our beliefs, values, desires, or ambitions – is being compromised in a relationship.³

When your safety or integrity is at stake, it's worth fighting for. The same thing is true when someone you care about is being threatened. I don't know about you, but I get more enraged when my daughter or husband is under attack than when I'm personally hurt or insulted. It doesn't even have to be someone you know to get your blood boiling: harm done to a vulnerable stranger can prompt outrage in us. Righteous indignation flares when we feel protective of someone who cannot defend themselves. And that is certainly no sin.

Just as with pain, anger is a signal that something's very wrong. Figuring out what's wrong is the first step. But the second step is just as important: what we do with the anger. "Be angry," St. Paul advises us; "be angry, but do not sin."

Because anger is powerful, and if we don't deal with it straightforwardly, it will come out sideways, its explosion or slow toxic leak hurting ourselves or others in irresponsible ways. It's not anger that's the sin – it's our irresponsible handling of it. If you want a good example of what happens when anger is simply suppressed and ignored, check out the movie "Ordinary People" again. I suspect there is a reason it was filmed in Lake Forest. For Mary Tyler Moore's character, everything is always fine, fine, fine. She is nothing if not in control. Until, of course, she's not – and her anger boils over in a terrifying way, perhaps terrifying most of all to her. Anger doesn't just go away. It's real, and if it isn't addressed it will come out sideways.

Suppressing anger isn't responsible. Neither is exploding at the wrong person. "Displaced anger" is what we call it – you might know it as "kick the dog." We come home from a harangue from the boss and we take it out on the kids. We get off the phone with our critical mother-in-law and promptly take it out on our husband. We look at the bills and we're mad at ourselves for

making stupid decisions and getting in over our heads, but we're too embarrassed to admit it, so we take it out on everyone around us.

We find our income slashed in two and we're mad at the universe – the unfairness of a system that rewards incompetence, arbitrarily protects some and destroys others in its wake – and we take it out on ourselves in the form of ulcers and depression.

Be angry but do not sin ... by suppressing it and letting it come out sideways. Be angry but do not sin ... by taking it out on someone who doesn't deserve it. Be angry but do not sin ... by ignoring the important message anger is trying to tell you. The purpose of anger, just as the purpose of pain, is to help make the body healthy again.

This is how St. Paul says it: "Let no evil talk come out ... but only what is useful for building up." Building up the body – your emotional well-being, your physical well-being, and more than that, the well-being of the people around you. Your family. Your workplace. Your community. And *this* community – the body of Christ.

An ironic thing about churches is that we are often the worst at handling anger – in large part because we think we're supposed to be above all that. One of the most liberating things I've found in my work on our church's history is the long, *long* pattern of people being annoyed with each other. From the beginning, we have been more likely to *disagree* than to agree. The great thing is that when we've been straightforward about our anger and disagreements, it's actually propelled us forward. I remember being terrified when I first got here and you had planned for Marcus Borg to speak. It offended a number of you – and we heard about it on the Session. I was afraid we'd have a major fight on our hands. But we didn't. People said their piece and then moved on. Turns out that's the way we do things here, at least when we're healthy. Presbyterian Women had hosted gay-rights advocate Janie Spahr a number of years ago, and the roof didn't cave in. Even more astonishing, I found out that a century ago, Dr. McClure had invited labor agitator Eugene Debs to our pulpit. Eugene Debs! Neither his socialism nor

his dirty overalls could make people leave the church. We have a history of disagreeing, even being angry at each other. When we're not healthy, we clobber each other, impugn other's motives, talk behind each other's backs, or take our ball and go home. But when we're healthy – which over the course of a century and a half, we have been more often than not – when we're healthy, we disagree respectfully, we fight for what we think is right, we defend the integrity of our church.

St. Paul advises: “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice.” Be angry, but do not sin. Be angry, and then put it away. And the final step in resolving anger is this, Paul tells us: “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you.” That's the real resolution of anger, isn't it? When we're able to forgive – not to forget, not to pretend that a threat wasn't real - but when we're able to forgive and then move on. One counselor puts it this way: When we have been threatened or wronged, “we forgive when we overcome resentment ... not by denying our right to the resentment, but instead by trying to offer the wrongdoer compassion, benevolence, and love.”⁴ As we give these, we find that we ourselves have been set free. The anger has no power anymore.

Go ahead and be angry -good and angry -but do not sin. Take the time to find out why -figure out what the primary colors are beneath the blend that's right in front of you.

Be angry but do not sin. Figure out what's going on and then deal with it straightforwardly so that it doesn't come out in side ways and toxic ways.

Be angry but do not sin. As you are able, be tenderhearted. Be kind and compassionate, not as a first step, but as last, even as you would like to be treated, even as God has already treated you.

In the end, what Paul knows and we're finding out is this: we will be stronger for our anger, and not weaker. We will be bound together in love as

anger serves to build us up, not tear us down ... as anger serves to make us better Christians than we would have been. Amen.

¹ Harriet Goldhor Lerner, *The Dance of Anger* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 1.

² <http://threechordwonder.blogspot.com/2008/02/anger-secondary-emotion.html>.

³ Harriet Goldhor Lerner, *The Dance of Anger* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 1.

⁴ Dr. North. <http://www.ed.utah.edu/edps/positivePsych/5060090.php>