

## “Anger or Forgiveness?”

August 9, 2015

*Sinning like a Christian: The Good News series*

The recent film “Inside Out” has taken our emotions and put them at center stage. Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, and Anger are shown as characters in our heads, and if you haven’t seen it yet, I’d encourage you, too. It’s a powerful film that reminds us that we’re a mix of all of them.

That being said, it’s easy for us to get stuck in anger. Frederick Buechner says “Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

We don’t need to pretend that anger doesn’t exist. Nor do we need to allow it take over. We’re talking about what’s sometimes called “wrath” – that vindictive anger and revenge that we sometimes want. And we want it bad. The result is violence. That’s how it’s played out at its most extreme. That’s why it’s deadly.

Even saying that, I can’t stand here and say “don’t get angry.” We all do – sometimes our anger is justified. We have to let it out and express it in a healthy way if we want to move to healing. Paul’s word to the Ephesians isn’t that we can’t be angry, but we have to control what happens in the middle of it.

<sup>26-27</sup> Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don’t use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don’t stay angry. Don’t go to bed angry. Don’t give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life.

What makes you angry? Disrespect? Injustice? Everyday struggles? Being wronged? Nothing going right? Bad drivers? Jesus got angry – right before he was crucified. He turns over the tables in the Temple courts. Check it in John 2. His anger comes because those who were buying and selling were keeping people from worshipping God. He gets angry at the “religious” folks in charge.

People had to buy certain animals to sacrifice, and as you might imagine, it was easier for people to get sucked into the greed of supply and demand. If people need something, what happens to the price? It goes up! Jesus’ anger is directed at those who would keep people away from God.

We might call it “righteous anger.” It’s a characteristic of God, too. Will Willimon says, “The God of Israel and the church is a passionate lover, a God who has staked a

great deal upon us, who cares deeply about us, risks all for us, and demands the best of us.”

God is concerned with evil and injustice and calls us to be concerned, too. Sometimes that’s where we are. We’re angry because this isn’t the way it’s supposed to be. This certainly can’t be what God intends for us and for our world. This violence...death...injustice...poverty...hatred...

But sometimes we’re just angry at someone or something – not out of a concern for anyone but ourselves. And so many times, we hang onto it. We harbor it. We allow anger to get the best of us, and the results are destructive. Willimon says, “Anger is famous for beginning with focus upon another and ending all curved in upon itself.”

Our thirst for anger and our acceptance of it is pervasive. We ignore violence and even condone it. Domestic disputes and violence are common. We don’t really blink an eye. It’s just the way it is. But as those who seek to follow Jesus Christ, the call to turn away from this extreme anger and violence is clear – and difficult. Hear words of wisdom from Proverbs:

Fools give full vent to their rage,  
but the wise bring calm in the end. 29:11  
A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict,  
but the one who is patient calms a quarrel. 15:18  
Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person,  
do not associate with one easily angered,  
<sup>25</sup> or you may learn their ways  
and get yourself ensnared. 22:24-25

The opposite or the virtue connected to anger is described in a few different ways. Some would say the opposite is patience. Some would say forgiveness. However we describe it, however we seek to overcome, we need help. We cannot do it alone!

Jesus teaches that anger is just as severe and damaging as murder. Maybe because he knew that’s where it could lead if unchecked and held in. Anger is us at our worst. Name-calling sometimes escalates to violence quickly. To say we hate someone is to wish them dead.

When Jesus refers to “an eye for an eye” and then calls those listening to turn the other cheek, it’s a call to end the cycle of violence rather than letting it continue. Today the work of restorative justice is a powerful example of seeking to end the cycle of violence.

And then there are Jesus’ words about forgiveness to Peter. “How many times do I have to forgive someone who wrongs me?” We can debate it – 77 times or 70

times 7. In the end, perhaps the point is that we lose count. Forgiveness is that important.

But please don't think that I'm assuming is easy. It's not. It's some of the toughest work we do for ourselves and with each other. Forgiveness is not necessarily forgetting, but seeking to really treat others and love others as we've been loved by God.

The good news is that we have a choice every time. Seeking to forgive is not being weak, but relying on God's strength and God's justice. Psalm 137 is one of the most violent in all of Scripture. It comes out of a time when the Israelites are in captivity. They have experience violence. They have seen their homeland destroyed. And their response is to ask God for justice. Yes, they seek violence, but ultimately, they leave it up to God.

The good news is that we have help at every step. We can allow our faith in Jesus Christ to show in how we deal with one another. Does it mean that we'll be best friends with those who mistreat us? No! It means we let God fight for us instead of trying to fight a battle that can only bring more hurt and pain. The words from *The Message* are clear – that we open the door for evil to lead when we hold onto anger.

The good news is that God is big enough – and God's grace is wide enough – that we can offer ourselves honestly to God. We don't have to hold back as if God we're trying to shield our real feelings from God. The God of the universe is able to receive us as we are. And when we're open to expressing our anger – even our rage – God can bring healing. Our willingness to share those real feelings is an act of faith in God who can help us to seek forgiveness. It may not come quickly, but it will never come without trying.

And dealing with our anger and seeking forgiveness will change us. It forces us to deal with ourselves and our ego. And it forces us to realize that God in Christ who could respond to us in anger, chooses to respond with love and grace that saves us and makes us new. This is the Holy One who says "Father, forgive them...for they know not what they do."

That's really who God is – the one who forgives – and invites us to receive that grace in a way that helps us to feel what we feel, even when we get angry, but choose the sometimes long road of forgiveness.

PRAYER OF ST. FRANCIS:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy;

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.