

## “Inside Anger”

March 6, 2016

*From the Inside Out series – 4h Sunday in Lent*

What a father! Two brothers react to a father’s love and grace. One is grateful and understands a little better how amazing grace really is because he’s received it. The other brother is angry. It was Aristotle who’s credited with saying, "To become angry is easy. To be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose and in the right way - that is not easy."

Frederick Buechner says this about anger: “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.”

“Inside anger” is not a place we want to go. I’ll confess it’s not a place I want to go! Letting God change us from the inside out is a part of the season of Lent – hopefully it’s a part of our faith all the time, but getting to the root of our anger is hard.

And what better story than the prodigal son? You can find a lot of commentary and study on this story from Luke 15. It’s probably the most well-known Bible story of all. Artists have attempted to re-create the scene of the son coming home to the father whose arms are open and ready to receive him. And some of those same artists show the older brother, too – usually in the dark corner – far off and certainly not enjoying the party. The father who could’ve been angry, but isn’t, and the brother who is furious!

Jesus offers this story – this parable – to a crowd who would have been familiar with what Jewish law said – that a rebellious son could be stoned to death. Can you imagine how they reacted when they heard Jesus?

They might have been surprised by the father’s reaction, but probably not by the brother’s reaction. We’re not either, are we? Can’t you feel the annoyance that the older brother feels? Can’t you feel the anger and rage? The desire for the younger brother to get what he deserves?

Madeleine L’Engle writes: “We are so familiar with the parable of the prodigal son that we forget part of the message, and that is the response of the elder brother. As I read and reread Scripture, it seems evident that God is far

more loving than we are, and far more forgiving. We do not want God to forgive our enemies, but Scripture teaches us that all God wants is for us to repent, to say, "I'm sorry, Father, forgive me," as the prodigal son does when he comes to himself and recognizes the extent of his folly and wrongdoing. And the father rejoices in his return.

Then there's the elder brother. We don't like to recognize ourselves in the elder brother who goes off and sulks because the father, so delighted at the return of the younger brother, prepares a great feast. Punishment? A party! Because the younger brother has learned the lesson he has, in a sense, already punished himself. But, like the elder brother, we're apt to think the father much too lenient."

Last week, we heard Jesus' call to repent – to look at ourselves and turn around to God again. This is what the younger son does, and yet it's hard for the older son to grasp that repentance carries the promise of forgiveness. And yet maybe we see ourselves in this older brother – struggling to get just how deep God's grace really is, trying to understand how it is that a screw-up can be loved and celebrated when we're still here just as we've been all along! It's just not fair!

Here's the thing: when we talk about God's grace and God's mercy, we cannot use the word "fair" in the discussion. Grace, by its very nature, is unfair. Grace is getting what we don't deserve. It's not based on merit or good works or how much we've done or not done. It's a gift of God given freely to all.

Mercy is much the same with a twist. Mercy is not getting what we do deserve. If we go back to what Jewish law said – what was coming to this son who had rebelled against his father and had broken that commandment to honor his father – we know what everyone thought he deserved. The father has every right to be angry. And yet, the father doesn't give him what he deserves. Instead, he throws a party!

It's not that the older son isn't good. He's been faithful. He's been there with his father. He's done right by his father. It's his attitude that's a problem. He's not joyful in serving his father. He resents his father for being gracious and merciful. He's living with a sense of entitlement, and if we're honest, that's the real struggle.

We want God's grace for ourselves, but how gracious do we want God to be with others? It's OK for me to receive God's grace, but what about when it comes to that person who has screwed up? Just how gracious do we want God to be? How gracious does God want us to be?

Henri Nouwen shared his struggle as the eldest son of a large family. His siblings lived the good life while he became a priest, served the poor in Latin America, then moved to a community to minister to the severely disabled. He admitted that he felt resentment when he thought about their lives of luxury compared with his life of frugality and service.

Nouwen said, "My resentment is not something easily distinguished and (rational). It's far more pernicious . . . something that has attached itself to the underside of my virtue. Isn't it good to be obedient, dutiful, law-abiding, hardworking, self-sacrificing.... and still it seems that my resentments are tied to my most praiseworthy attitudes. When I want to be most generous, I get caught in anger; when I do my best to accomplish a task well, I wonder why everyone doesn't work as hard as I do." Have you ever felt like that? I have!

Here's the challenge: our faith in Jesus Christ should change our point of view. Maybe it means that we regard others as important to God. We should see ourselves differently, too. The older brother had the gift of grace just like his brother. The father assures him that he's beloved. And yet his struggle is to let go of the idea that he could ever work hard enough or be good enough to earn his father's love. Rather than thinking that we deserve God's grace, we're called to tell about and share God's grace – to speak up about how it changed us.

Lent is an inward journey, but the journey we take with Christ should reflect in our outward actions. How is God making you more aware of God's grace in your life and for others? Who needs to be embraced with compassion? Who needs to be accepted with love?

As we come to the table, may we be aware of and moved by the gift of grace – not just for ourselves, but for all people. May we open our hearts to receive God's love. Thanks be to God. AMEN.