

## Getting Angry, With God

Ok so when Teresa and I were first dating we used to do this crazy little thing that may or may not have involved jumping out of perfectly good airplanes. I remember one of the first times we went skydiving, during the ground school thing they take you through they were emphasizing something called a hard arch. It is the single most important thing a skydiver can do after exiting the aircraft. See when you have 60 pounds of pack on your back, you will have a tendency to flip over, like a badminton birdie. THIS is not how you want to be facing when your parachute deploys. So you need to maintain a hard arch, hand and feet as far back as you can.

At one point the instructor tells us. "So when we get to altitude, the pilot will slow the plane down and the jumpmaster will open up the door. It'll be loud and windy and will get weally scawwy. If you find that you are absolutely loving it, what are you going to do?" Yeah, you're gonna hard arch. "Right, and what about if you are completely terrified?" Yup, you're gonna hard arch. "And if you find yourself going over your grocery list or feeling sleepy or you need to go to the bathroom or..." Yeah, you get it. We don't much care what you are feeling up there. Just that you hard arch.

In our Scripture this morning we read of Paul's "Instructions for Living" to the Christians in Ephesus. One of the most remembered portions of this text is a quote from Paul's reading of Psalm 4, "In your anger, do not sin." So, how about it? Has anyone seen some anger lately? Perhaps felt some? Whether it is the sickness, the suffering. "Yay though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death." Whether it is the politics, or the cabin fever, or just that it is not fair. Nothing about this year is what anyone signed up for. What can we possibly do to keep from getting angry?

Ready for the answer? Nothing. We don't need to, in fact we shouldn't try to not get angry at the things that legitimately give us reason to feel this way. Let's read it again, slowly. "In your anger, do not sin." It does not say "Don't be angry," and this makes a really big difference.

Anger is a feeling, a human emotion. And feelings are valid. Let me say that again. Whatever you are feeling right now, about whatever. Is valid. Fear, joy, sorrow, anger, elation. These are all very real parts of our very real human existence. And you are not alone in this. There's a reason the Yahoo Sports page dedicated to the game of tennis is actually called "Busted

Racket." Yup. We've been there. All of us. In some way. We get it. You are not the first nor the last nor the only to be mad as you know what, at, you know fill in the blank. If you are feeling angry lately, at big things or at small, know that you are not alone.

Living in Christ is not so much how we feel, or even what we feel, but how we act and what we do. Like jumping out of that perfectly good airplane. Feeling happy? Arch. Feeling scared? Yeah, still arch.

Feeling angry? Do not sin.

God not only grants us permission to feel angry, God teaches us how to do it. God gives us the words to use. One of the Psalms today is a Psalm of Lament. Fully one third of the Psalms are written to give us the words to express sorrow, hurt, bitterness, even anger. We are invited to genuine expression toward God because we are invited into genuine relationship with God. And into genuine relationship with each other. And this can help us immensely.

Like dealing with the banana holder in your living room.

You know what I'm talking about? The banana holder. It's usually right below the TV. Our banana holder is made by Samsung I think, though I hear you can get them from Sony, LG, Panasonic. Here's the deal, pro parenting tip: you need to learn real quick the difference between disobedience, and mischief. If you haven't explicitly told your 3 year old not to put a banana in the blu-ray player, or told them some rule about having fruit in the living room, ya can't really get mad. And even if you have, c'mon. I mean it fits. It's shiny and has buttons. What else are you supposed to do with it?

Recognizing when we are in banana holder moments can steer us clear of getting bent out of shape unnecessarily, sure. It is good to know when you can and should just let things go. But what about when it's not that straightforward?

When you can't get together for the holiday this year. When you can't get together for the holidays, ever. When you can't visit someone in the hospital or the nursing home. When the test comes back positive. When the pink slip arrives. When the papers are served. When the

driver was drunk. Then what? When it seems like our nation, our world, is tearing itself apart and we are ravaged by disease, sickness and death.

Be angry. Really. Be. Really angry.

And do not sin.

So my mom had this crazy contraption called a pressure cooker. Anyone know what one of these things is? It looks like some steam punk looking thing out of Dr. Frankenstein's lab. She put some water and what we can only guess were equal parts carrots and butter. Seal the thing up and bring it to a boil. The results were of course magic, but the process was fascinating too. Chacka-chacka-chacka-chacka. I can still hear it. There was this heavy steel regulator at the top that would sing and dance playfully in the steam as culinary wizardry ensued within.

So carrots aside, wait, sorry, having a moment. Ok, so carrots aside, this is a really great lesson. If it didn't have that pressure release, what would happen? The whole thing would explode. And if the little regulator wasn't there, it would explode. And if there wasn't any heat or pressure to begin with. Salad. Plain old carrots. And I gotta tell you, that ain't living.

But holding it all in the balance. Chacka-chacka-chacka-chacka. Meticulously watched and deftly crafted by the Master Chef and the results can be heaven.

When we can learn to feel anger, and sadness, and disappointment, and almost any other human emotion and express them honestly, but also gracefully. Truthfully, but gently. When we hold it all in the balance. With a Master Chef watching over. The results can be heaven.

We are never called to deny our feelings, to stuff our emotions. Jesus came that we would live life and live it to the fullest, not to become dispassionate and disengage. Love big. Risk big. Feel big. And let those around you do the same.

Ok, sounds good, right? But how? What does this look like in the real world and how do we do this? This is great on Sunday morning, but what will this actually look like this Thursday?

Our passage in Ephesians fleshes this out pragmatically, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” The first half is something that is difficult enough. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth. If you spend any time on social media or reading the news, I think we can all agree this has become increasingly difficult. I can think of some unwholesome talk I’d like to unload on some folks.

It is the second half of this verse that really catches me though. Our words are to be truly exceptional. It is no longer enough to simply prevent ourselves from slander, or hateful speech or insult. But rather carefully, gracefully, even sparingly, we are to choose words “only what is helpful for building others up.” Yikes. I’ve heard this described as a five-fold gate. Before saying something, anything, THINK. Ask Is it True, Is it Helpful, Is it Inspiring, Is it Necessary, Is it Kind? As we feel ourselves getting angry, that is precisely the time to say less. To act less. To pause, wait. Listen more. Understand more. Yes, this is hard. And yes, this is possible.

One of the great things about this passage is that it can serve as a powerful framework. “In your anger, do not sin.” Anger is a valid human emotion. Sin is a way of doing, or action. So watch what happens when we generalize. In your [fill in some emotion] do not [fill in some action that is destructive or hurtful.]

In your loneliness, do not overindulge.

In your victory, do not gloat.

In your bitterness, do not insult.

In your joy, do not boast.

None of these are quick fixes or easy. But all of these can be an important starting point on the journey.

Want some tactical advice? One of the guys I work with is ex-military which makes for some fascinating conversation. He was telling me about helicopter training and one of the scariest

things he got to do was this metal cage they have in Pensacola. It's a frame mockup of a helicopter and they strap you in with the harness and all that stuff, then it inverts and plunges you into a pool of water, strapped in, upside down. Helicopters are top heavy and have this tendency to flip over during a hard water landing.

So in that situation, what is the first thing they are trained to do?

Count to five.

1,2,3,4,5.

Get your bearings. Slow down. Feel for the release. Determine which exit will work. Calm Pause.

We've been talking about one good thing. Maybe this our one good thing this morning: nothing. Permission, even direction, to do nothing. The ability to pause. To wait, to hold the tongue. Sometimes the best thing to say is to not say anything at all. At least in the thick of it. At least in the moment. And maybe not ever.

Even and especially in the big oops in life. Teresa and I are very quick to forgive. We always assume the other has our collective best interest in mind. Always. Really. Ok, sometimes it takes some imagination. I am sure Jeff had our best interest in mind when he [Just get with Teresa. There's been some real doozies.] But we do and it works.

And the ability to hit the pause button. You know what I mean, the pause button. We don't fight. We have "Family Growth Opportunities." So imagine the something just hit the ventilator and we are about to start dealing with it abd...oh and that's when Lillian decides to Captain Marvel off her playhouse. Yeah, so we're cool, and we are going to talk about this some more, but not right now. 1,2,3,4,5. Pause.

I can tell you two things. One, it is because of the love we share. Our bond. Our relationship.

And also, that the miracle of Christian living is that we are all in relationship, bonded and share in a love from God that is bigger than any grudge, more brilliant than any darkness, and can outshine any insult. As Paul implores us “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” When God is Ruler over everything, which God is, God is ruler over every interaction. And every interaction falls within the realm of God’s grace.

How does this work in an election year? How does this work in THIS election year? Can we talk about the starfish again?

If Jimmy’s story prompts you from apathy, or even cynicism, to roll up your sleeves and throw a starfish back in, then absolutely, please do that. Find those individual acts of random kindness. Bring a little light into your corner of God’s world. It makes a difference to this one. Absolutely.

But is there anyone else out there who gets really angry at it all? Chucking starfish against the tide. Why does it feel like I am the only one doing this? Can’t we get some more help here? Shouldn’t we organize some team of starfish throwers? Or how about this, ask the question why are they washing up in such large numbers in the first place? Is there something that can be done to keep this from happening? Is there something systemic going on here?

These are the kinds of things that break my heart.

Sometimes this enterprise is labelled as “righteous anger.” Let your heart break for what breaks God’s heart. Let your heart be stirred. And even called to act. We must recognize that some, even many, of the issues we are facing demand collective as well as individual action. Hold the sign. Organize the boycott. Fight misinformation. Seek the truth and demand leaders who are truthtellers and stand up for the ones separated from parents, the orphan, the widow, the prisoner, the immigrant.

But here’s the deal. As righteous as the cause, and as angry as we get. The same guidance we’ve read above is still very much in play. Do not sin. Be kind and compassionate. Speak only what is helpful for building others up.

I remember this past June. Associated Press, Newsweek, dozens of news outlets all reporting the same thing. The President was talking about the latest economic numbers and stated that "hopefully George [Floyd] is looking down right now and saying this is a great thing that's happening for our country. This is a great day for him. It's a great day for everybody."

What?! I was outraged. How could someone take something like a jobs report and suggest this is what the memory of one of the worst cases of civil rights abuse in modern memory should invoke? So what was my response? Repost the articles so both of my Facebook friends can see it? Rant and rave to Teresa behind closed doors (seriously, pray for her)? Fall back to whatever echo chamber I've surrounded myself with? Left to my own devices, I probably would have done these things or similar.

But there's my friend Randy. We see eye to eye on some of things, but not so much on others, the current administration being one of those things. And he's my best friend, my Proverbs 27 iron sharpening iron these past four years, for the past 20 years personally. We don't agree on things, and we love each other and we listen to each other, and even yell at each other sometimes too. If you don't have a Randy in your life, get one.

I knew that as I formulated an opinion of this situation, I would end up talking with him about it, so I better conduct myself with care and grace. So, I paused. I waited.

1,2,3,4,5. Yes, I even prayed. And I read.

It turns out that our government keeps a transcript of everything the President says. So I read the whole speech. I can tell you that for me personally, that in and of itself is a hard step.

Yes, he talked about the economy. And yes, he talked about George Floyd...50 minutes after talking about the jobs report. The George Floyd comment actually, came right after a section where he was talking about racial inequality. Armed with actual fact I could have discussion with my best friend.

Did the exercise change my political leanings? Probably not. But did I let my anger motivate me toward relationship or toward retaliation? It taught me an important lesson in the value of

pausing. Even and especially when I disagree with something. Even and especially when I find myself angered, even justly.

When in doubt, wait. Say little, or nothing. Gather what facts there are. Then engage and listen. Love. And live in genuine relationship with God, with ourselves, and with each other. This is the greatest commandment. This can be our greatest achievement.