

Words to Live By: Be Angry, But Don't Sin
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
August 2, 2009

Yesterday in the “Home & Garden” section of the *Contra Costa Times* Joan Morris writes about the invasion of the community garden behind the *Times* headquarters in Walnut Creek by squirrels. Employees and volunteers donate produce to the Contra Costa and Solano Food Banks. She writes, “I hadn’t known that Our Garden is surrounded by large colonies of squirrels. At times, they look like small herds of buffalo roaming the vast plains. Mini-buffalo with the appetite of locusts. They wiped out everything we planted that first day. We replanted. We covered everything with bird netting and cover cloth. We put up fencing. We tried chemical warfare, and still they come.” Professing to be a peaceful person toward humans as well as critters, she confesses, “Lately my thoughts have been less Gandhi and more Wile E. Coyote. I lie awake nights dreaming up ways to repel and, yes, torture squirrels.”ⁱ

Most of us can relate to Joan’s experience. Anger is a common human emotion. It arises in response to silly squirrels and in response to grave injustice, as we’ve witness in Iran in recent protests against a fraudulent election.

Today our scripture has a worthy Word to Live By: Be angry, but don’t sin. This verse recognizes that we will be angry. What we do with our anger makes it healthy or destructive. This morning we will look at what anger is and how it manifests itself in our lives. Then we’ll investigate some of the effects of anger, and finally look at some tools for channeling our anger in ways that do not lead us into temptation to sin.

Anger is a human emotion that signals to us that something is not right. Anger is an alarm sounding that something is wrong. It is a trumpet announcement that someone is hurt, rights are being violated, needs are not being met. Anger is a response to pain. It raises our consciousness to the fact that something is amiss. Instead of dismissing our anger or repressing it, we need to pay attention to it.

Anger usually manifests itself in two different ways. One way is a slow simmering within. We might call this crock-pot anger. To cook something in a crock-pot, you toss in the ingredients in the morning and the meal slowly simmers throughout the day. The temperature slowly rises as the day goes on. This is one way in which anger works on us, simmering away inside, not very visible on the surface, but slowly eating away at our souls in harmful ways within.

I recognize crock-pot anger in response to household chores. I like to keep the house neat and orderly, at least the public areas. Sometimes the laundry will be sitting on a chair in the family room, even neatly folded, just waiting for someone to take it to the bedroom. I think to myself, “Next time they walk from the office

to the bedroom, surely they will see that laundry sitting right there on top of the chair. They will kindly think of how efficient they can be by taking it to the bedroom as long as they are on their way there anyway with empty hands.” Most days I can wait hours, counting the dozens of times that pile of laundry is passed unnoticed, with the temperature rising within me until finally at the end of the day, I get up and take it to the bedroom myself! Had I done it myself at the beginning of the day, I could have used all that energy for some other purpose!

A second way that anger expresses itself is in an explosion, like a stick of dynamite with a short fuse, like the Wile E. Coyote cartoons. Anger erupts like a volcano spewing hot lava, usually with a few choice words, all over the recipient. Dynamite anger makes itself very visible so that it can't be missed and draws a great deal of attention. These days we commonly find it happening in instances of road rage, when a driver accidentally or purposefully does something that offends another driver. Email has provided another venue for dynamite rage to be expressed. We may misunderstand a message received or disagree with another's opinion and instantaneously respond with a different opinion, or criticism, or even an attack. Pushing “reply” and “send” can become a way of saying, “There, take that!” At another level are crimes of passion, murder, assault, and violence committed in a fit of anger.

These are two ways in which anger manifests itself: crock-pot anger that simmers inside, eating away at our souls, and dynamite anger that explodes in often harmful ways to oneself and to others. Let's look at the impact that anger can have in our lives.

Anger tends to be isolating. We distance ourselves from those with whom we are angry, avoiding their presence. Our anger becomes a wall between us and someone else, preventing reconciliation. Someone who is so angry that they isolate themselves doesn't need to be in relationship. Sadly they often don't want to be healed of their anger. They choose to live in the simmering crock-pot, burning their life away alone. Such a response is a means of separating ourselves from others, which is the meaning of sin.

Another way anger can impact us is driving us to seek revenge. When we are hurt, we naturally want to see a wrong righted. Sometimes we feel drawn to take action on our own behalf, to seek or wish physical or emotional harm to another human being. It's typical to say, “I've been hurt and somebody's going to pay for this.” When we act in revenge we purposefully hurt another with our words or actions. Revenge may make us feel good for a moment, as if justice is served, but revenge creates more damage and is not a pathway toward reconciliation. When we feel like seeking revenge, a good question to ask is, “Is it more important that I am right or that I seek reconciliation and renewed relationship?”

Anger need not always result in negative action. It can also lead to positive results. When anger is directed toward injustice, it can lead to positive change. The movement toward health care reform in our nation is such a response to the unjust fact that in California alone 7 million people have insufficient or no health insurance. Nearly 80 percent of the uninsured are full-time working people. Over half of all personal bankruptcies are due to health care costs.ⁱⁱ The prophets call people of faith to be angry at economic injustice and to direct our energy toward positive reform.

These are three of the effects anger can have upon us and our relationships. Anger can be isolating. Anger can seek revenge for hurt inflicted by harming others. The energy of anger can be directed toward positive change.

When we recognize anger brewing within and rising to the surface, there are some helpful ways to respond so that we might use its energy in healthy ways. One tool is to stop and count to 10. Pausing will probably not dissipate all of our anger, but it will diffuse it and help us respond more rationally and consider an appropriate response. We can ask ourselves, “Will it be helpful to say what I really feel like saying – or would it be better to keep my mouth shut for a while?” When in doubt, err on the side of not saying it in the heat of the moment! Call for a time out in the conversation to give both sides a chance to cool down and consider the next step. Be patient with yourself and the other.

A second tool is to express your feelings in a safe place. You can tell God. The psalms have many expressions of anger prayed to God. It may be helpful to talk with a neutral party who will not feel personally attacked by your anger, but who in listening, may help you understand the source of your anger. Oftentimes it is helpful to write a letter or in a journal as a way of naming your anger and recognizing it. This often drops the temperature so that a reasonable approach can be found. The purpose in writing a letter is not necessarily to send it to the person with whom you are angry, which may only inflame the situation. The purpose is to express yourself in a safe place. Remember that anger is an alarm that something is wrong. Journaling about your feeling can help you step back to analyze the source of the hurt and pain being experienced. Is there a healthier way to address the pain you are experiencing?

Abraham Lincoln’s Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, complained to Lincoln that he had been accused of favoritism in very abusive terms by a major general. Lincoln suggested that he write the officer a sharp letter. Stanton did so and showed the strongly worded missive to the President, who applauded its powerful language. “What are you going to do with it?” he asked. Surprised by the question, Stanton said, “Send it.” Lincoln shook his head. “You don’t want to send that letter. Put it in the stove. That is what I do when I write a letter like that

in a state of anger. It's a good letter and you had a good time writing it and feel better. Now, burn it and write another."ⁱⁱⁱ

A third tool is to pray the Lord's Prayer. It is a model prayer that often expresses for us just what we need. In situations of anger, two petitions are especially relevant. One is "thy will be done." Ask God what God's desire for this situation or relationship is. We usually know what our will is, what we'd like to see happen, how we'd like to resolve the situation, perhaps even seek revenge or punishment. But how might God work a resolution to this conflict.

The second relevant petition is "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." We can seek forgiveness. Oftentimes we need to forgive ourselves for our participation in a hurtful situation. We need God's forgiveness for ourselves and for the other. And we often need to extend forgiveness to an offender.

Anger is a human emotion that is part of our God-given design. It has an energy that can be used for good or for harm. Anger manifests itself in a slow crock-pot simmer or as an explosive stick of dynamite. Anger can have the effect of isolating us, of motivating revenge, or of channeling our energy toward positive change. Some tools to help us manage our anger are counting to 10 or calling a time out; expressing our anger in a safe place; and praying the Lord's prayer, seeking God's will and forgiveness for the situation.

Without a doubt, we're going to experience anger. It's what we do with it that makes the difference. That's why some wise words to live by are: Be angry, but don't sin.

ⁱ Joan Morris, "Squirrels bring out Wile E. Coyote in me," *Contra Costa Times*, August 1, 2009.

ⁱⁱ www.calchurches.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Living Pulpit*, Vol. 2, No. 4, Oct.-Dec. 1993, p. 19.