

CONCERNING ANGER
Matthew 5:21-26
Sunrise Presbyterian Church
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Years ago, when I was fresh out of college, I taught ninth and tenth grade English. One of the first things I learned about teaching was the propensity for adolescents to fight - particularly in a crowded hall - all it took was for someone to utter the phrase - "Your mama . . ." during class changes, and a fight ensued. The teachers worried about someone carrying a knife or a chain - but we never thought a student would have a gun. I learned a good deal about anger during those years.

A few years ago a man in Florida was texting his baby sitter during a movie. Another man was incensed at the interruption caused by the light of the phone. An argument began - and the guy who was angry shot the texting man. There's not much difference between his reaction and my ninth grader's reactions - the difference in the outcome lay in the fact that he had a gun ready to use.

Anger - we learn from *Wikipedia* - "is an emotion related to one's psychological interpretation of having been offended, wronged, or denied. Often it indicates when one's basic boundaries are violated." Anger is a normal emotion - we all have it - it serves us well at times - and at other times, it can destroy us. Because anger arises from violations of our boundaries - we are often angry at other people - but anger can also be directed inward at our own selves and individual failings - we may realize we have not lived the lives for which we hoped - we may acknowledge that our lives are confined by disability or illness - we might realize that we have little ability to control our lives - and we become angry. The emotion, anger, in itself is not sinful - what is sinful is the damage anger inflicts on ourselves and others.

Frederick Buechner describes this damage well: "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 tongues 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 for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."ⁱ

Anger eats at us - it gives us high blood pressure - stomach problems - tension - stress - long smoldering anger is often at the root of our depression - anger takes a decided physical toll on our bodies. And anger takes a decided toll on our relationships. Our anger at others leads us to exclude them from our lives - to castigate them - to call them fools. When we cast others out of our circle of relationships - we diminish our lives - because we lose the fullness we might have from others.

Anger impacts all of us - we all harbor anger issues. Some of us deal with them well. Some of us stuff our anger deep down inside us - Some of us allow anger to erupt at any time - actually we could say that all of us sometimes stuff our anger - sometimes cope well - and other times fail miserably to reign in our hurt feelings. Anger is part of our lives.

Thus, Jesus hits home with his comments concerning anger in our morning's reading from Matthew. Jesus begins quoting from the Ten Commandments - "You have heard - You shall not murder - and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment." And we nod along - Well, of course - WE have not murdered - WE would not have shot someone for texting in the theater - WE would not have killed someone out of our anger - Jesus continues: "But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable for judgment." If we are angry - and we are often angry at our families - at others in the congregation - at people in the grocery store - at politicians - at people who call us ugly names - at people who don't obey the leash law - at the boss who fired us - at the teacher who failed us - we are often very angry - and Jesus says we will be liable for judgment.

Jesus has expanded the law. The law prohibits murder - not anger. Jesus in recognizing that murder arises from anger - points to the root cause of violence - fear and anger. Anger prompted the person in the theater to shoot the texting man - Jesus wants us all to claim the progression from fear and anger - to murder - and to understand the destruction to which anger can lead.

We may not murder - but we may be moved to call someone a fool - we may write them out of our lives - we may discredit or denounce them. Anne Lamott writes, "I *know* the world is loved by God, as are all of its people, but it is much easier to believe that God hates or disapproves of or punishes the same people I do."ⁱⁱⁱ Lamott is describing most of us - she certainly is describing our current political climate - we call out those with whom we disagree - we claim they are wrong - they are fools - some may even go so far as to say that God does not love those with whom we disagree. We are all familiar with Westboro Baptist Church - but how often do we quietly come to a similar conclusion?

Lamott continues, "I've known for years that resentments don't hurt the person we resent, but that they do hurt and even sometimes kill us." She pushes the question - "I've been asking myself, am I willing to try to give up a bit of this hatred?"ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

What about us? Are we willing to give up a bit of our anger? Are we willing to give up a little of our fear? Might we stop calling others foolish? Could we try - because as Lamott says, "Jesus keeps harping on forgiveness."^{iv} We often ignore his harping. We often think his harping is for someone else - we may imagine we have no need to let go of anger - But Jesus keeps harping, and he is talking to us.

He is talking to us about the anger in our gut. He is talking to us about the emotional wounds we inflict on ourselves or others from that anger. Jesus is talking to us about how we dismiss people who think differently than we do - and Jesus is talking to us when we call others the fool. Yep - he is talking to US.

We will all be angry at some point or another. It's a natural, healthy emotion. Jesus admonishes us - to deal with our anger through forgiveness - by letting destructive emotions pass through us - Jesus finally invites us to deal with our anger through love.

What Jesus invites us to do is not simple - or easy - in fact, it's almost impossible. But love and forgiveness stand at the heart of the gospel inviting us to embrace new patterns of living. Might we try - to let go a little bit? Might we try - to forgive a little bit? Might we try - to accept those we hate and dislike? Might we try? Jesus is calling us - how can we not respond? Alleluia! Amen.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p. 2.

ⁱⁱ Anne Lamott, *Plan B*, pp. 220-221.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid, p. 224.