

WHAT TO DO WITH ANGER
EPHESIANS 4:25-5:2
AUGUST 18, 1985

A three-year old boy had not yet spoken. His parents were frantic. They took him for tests, examinations and speech therapy, but nothing helped. One day during lunch, the boy took his plate, angrily threw it at the wall and said, "This meal is inedible. I am sick of these despicable unappetizing peas!" His parents were amazed, "You can talk! Why have you not spoken before?" He replied, "Up until now, everything has been fine."

Will all of you who have never been angry please raise your hands? I suspect that anger is a universal feeling. It happens to the best of us. Anger is an emotion that many of us do not know how to handle. I am including myself, for I have a difficult time handling anger. This sermon, as are most sermons, is preached to myself as well as to any of you who might have the same problem. What do you do with anger? Suppress it? Express it? Or, are there other options?

In polite society many of us were taught to suppress our anger. Nice boys and girls do not get angry, especially Christian boys and girls do not get angry, we were told. Christians are always kind, quiet-spoken, meek and mild. I suppose that there has been a social and religious mandate to suppress anger because anger is so volatile. Anger as an emotion frightens us. Anger motivates revenge and even murder. Therefore, because anger can easily get out of control, one method of handling anger is to suppress it.

The problem with suppression is the side-effects. Anger is often suppressed for just so long, then it explodes, (and the explosion can be quite destructive) or the suppressed anger becomes cancerous and eats away at your insides. According to the psychiatrist, Dr. Theodore Rubin, suppressed anger can lead to anxiety, depression, insomnia, psychosomatic illness, alcoholism, frigidity, impotence and downright misery.

It may come as a surprise but the Bible does not advocate the suppression of anger. This method of handling anger is not biblical. The Epistle lesson today from Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus is quite clear. Paul writes in 4:26, "Be angry." In fact, there are times when it is wrong not to get angry. The Bible is filled with examples of righteous anger. Moses became angry, so did the prophets, and so did Jesus. These heroes became angry about the things that make God angry. The people of God should get angry about the things that make God angry! What makes God angry? The compromising of God's worship by honoring and serving other gods or idols, the mistreatment of poor people, and giving higher priority to legalism and ritualism than to the needs of people make God angry, according to the Bible. In fact, as I read the Bible, it is sin when Christians do not get angry at injustice, exploitation, oppression, war and, consequently, do nothing about them.

"Be angry," said Paul. In this passage, Paul is discussing interpersonal relationships within the church. Even God's people get angry with one another! Anger even occurs within the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto! And when you get angry, be angry. Don't suppress it.

But, is anger to be vented? The expression of anger is sometimes appropriate and constructive, but sometimes is inappropriate and destructive. A woman with a fiery temper died. As her casket was lowered into the grave, a storm suddenly arose. The wind howled, lightning flashed and struck a nearby tree. Her husband quickly looked upward and said, "She has arrived."

Vented anger---unleashed, uncontrolled anger---can be very damaging to relationships and to situations. Programs, discussions, neighborhood relationships, family gatherings can be destroyed by a fiery temper. In Ephesians 4:26 Paul writes, "Be angry," but he doesn't stop with that admonition. Paul continues, "Be angry but do not sin." There is a point in the expression of anger where it can become a sin. The expression of anger must be constructive, appropriate and helpful. In 4:29, three verses later, Paul writes, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear." Sometimes the expression of anger clears the air and imparts grace. Sometimes it is destructive. Paul continues in verse 31, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you." When anger turns into or causes bitterness, vengeance, wrath, and slander, then it has become sin.

"Anger can be released in a right way or a wrong and harmful way," according to Robert Hill. He compares anger to the gasoline in an internal combustion engine.

It is a fact that the gasoline is meant to be released only in small amounts into the cylinder heads. That gasoline should not be ignited all at once, otherwise there will be a terrific explosion. The difference is between controlling the gasoline on the one hand, so it moves you ahead somewhere and is useful, and, on the other hand, having the explosion control you. Anger is like that. Anger can be released in a right way or a wrong and harmful way. Feelings of anger are neither right nor wrong; it is how we act upon the anger that makes it right or wrong.

"Be angry but do not sin," wrote Paul. Then he added a phrase urging us to deal with the anger before it turns into something destructive. The entire sentence, which includes verse 27, reads, "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil." When you are angry, deal with the anger and the situation that caused the anger. Get the problem handled. Do not let time lapse for the lapse only causes the anger to fester. It eats away at you, churns inside you and

causes the anger to build up and turn into something ugly. When you are angry with someone, deal with the anger immediately. Don't let the sun go down. Don't let it fester overnight. Tell the person directly with as little emotion as possible, "I am angry." Do not say, "You make me so mad!" for that forces him/her to be defensive. Keep the statement in the first person, "I am angry." Then, explain and seek reconciliation.

There are also other options open to us besides suppressing or expressing anger. What you might do with anger is to turn it into a positive action. We observed the 40th anniversary of VJ Day this week. Jacob DeShazer spent forty months in a Japanese prison during World War II. He nearly lost his mind trying to control his anger. He burned with resentment against the guards until memories of his boyhood began to crowd out the bitterness. He remembered his Sunday School training where he had been taught that a person does not have to yield to hate. He had been taught that hate can be changed by opening yourself to a different kind of power. There in the prison camp, Jacob DeShazer gave himself to the new power and found his hate changing into the will to understand. After the war he wrote of his experience.

Captain Mitsuo Fuchida read the account and was intrigued. Fuchida had long dreamed of fighting bravely for the emperor and found his dream fulfilled when he commanded the air squadron that bombed the American fleet in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Throughout the war he had several harrowing experiences--he had been lost in a Borneo jungle, he crash landed, and he had both legs broken when he was blown off an aircraft carrier into the sea. Then he read the account of DeShazer's discovery that anger does not have to turn into hate or vengeance.

He also recalled the story of Margaret Covell. Margaret's parents had been missionaries in the Philippines until the Japanese executed them as spies. Margaret was filled with anger and hatred until she realized that her parents, in those last tragic moments of their lives, probably asked God's mercy on those killing them. She channeled her expression of anger into acts of mercy and volunteered in an American prison camp where she helped Japanese prisoners. Her anger was channelled into positive acts of reconciliation, which is what it means to love your enemies.

Captain Fuchida was mystified by the stories of both Christians and determined to learn more, he began reading the Bible. When he came to the place where Jesus on the cross, facing those torturing and killing him, cried, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," he realized why Jacob DeShazer and Margaret Covell had acted so strangely. Here was the kind of courage he had been seeking all his life. What he did on the battlefield was child's play compared with this! Captain Mitsuo Fuchida, commander of the squadron that bombed Pearl Harbor, committed his life to Jesus Christ, became a Christian and even a lay preacher. (I am indebted to the book, Courage in Both Hands, by Allan Hunter for this and the following story.)

Carlotta was getting tired of being laughed at. So far she had been able to control her temper, but her control was weakening. Carlotta was the first black student in a newly integrated southern high school. She understood that history was being made and that her response to the spitball attack was of critical importance. A juicy missile, with a bit of metal inside, would fly through the air, hit her in the cheek or forehead, accompanied by gales of laughter throughout the classroom. Sometimes she was angry and wanted to shout. Other times she wanted to crawl out of the room and never come back. She shared her problem with her church and Jim Lawson suggested that she change her tactic, no longer suppress her anger, but channel her anger into a positive act.

Carlotta became excited as she planned her response. The chance to put it into practice soon came. A spitball sailed through the air and this time missed her. Carlotta got up from her seat, picked up the spitball, walked back to the obviously guilty person, and with all the charm she could muster, with a big smile on her face, laid the spitball on his desk and said, "This is yours, isn't it?" Again, the class howled with laughter but, this time, not at Carlotta!

What do you do with anger? Don't suppress it, but don't vent your anger either. "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil." Express your anger in such a way--either directly or by channeling it into a positive act--that the expression of your anger becomes a means of reconciliation.