

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 (NRSV)

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have a problem with anger. By “we” I think I mean all of us. I know I do, and I think most people do. One way to tell is that when I read today’s lesson from Ephesians and heard, “Be angry, but do not sin” my first thought was, how is that possible? Isn’t anger a sin to begin with? Some parts of scripture suggest that anger by itself is sin. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus says (5:22), “if you are angry with a brother or a sister you will be liable to judgment.”

And yet we know that anger is not only part of the human condition, it is part of the divine condition. God is frequently angry with God’s people, and we know that Jesus was now and again angry with the Pharisees, with the people and even his own disciples.

And on the third hand, if we have three hands, we know that feelings of anger make us prey to sin. Otherwise, why would the author of Ephesians say, “Be angry *but* do not sin.” So, what’s the lowdown on anger?

First, and at a minimum, anger is a physiological reaction to threat. When we are angry, our pulse speeds up, our respiration increases, blood leaves our extremities to prepare us for injuries to our hands or feet, adrenaline floods our system to speed our reaction time and increase our strength, and we are prepared to either fight or flee. Anger and fear are brothers under the skin – the physiology of the two emotions is pretty similar.

Now, it would be hard to think of this physiological state of anger as a sin – we scarcely have any control over it. It is the body’s ancient stress reaction that helped us survive when we ran into a lion on the savanna or into a snake after we left Eden. My muse Barbara Brown Taylor calls anger one of God’s good gifts, our ability to recognize danger and respond to it.

I can think of many cases and causes of righteous, non-sinful anger. We might become angry to forcefully express our legitimate concern. For example, if we are watching our child do something dangerous or disrespectful or thoughtless or unloving and we become angry, then this can be a teaching moment. The child should know that we are angry, yes, but for a reason. Similarly, if a spouse or a friend is doing or has done something that is, again, dangerous or disrespectful, careless or unloving, we show our anger as a way of showing that we are concerned and personally involved.

We might become angry to forcefully mark a boundary of some sort. We often become angry when our expectations about our persons or our possessions are violated. If I don’t like to be touched in a particular way or by people whom I don’t know well, I might react with anger. If I want to protect a possession or to protect someone I love, a child or a spouse, I may show anger to warn off

someone or something that I see as posing a threat. “Get your hands off of me,” “don’t come any closer,” “leave me alone,” or “leave that alone,” are all manifestations of this kind of anger that enforces boundaries. Again, this anger is intended to be an expression of love, although aggressively protecting our possessions puts us on shaky grounds.

It follows, then, that a moment of anger can also be a teaching moment for ourselves. It is always worthwhile to ask, “Why am I angry?” Since fear and anger are so closely linked, we will often go on to ask, “What am I afraid of in this situation?” When we are angry or afraid, we may be reacting in a way that is disproportionate or more rooted in our own minds and hearts rather than in something intrinsic to what is going on.

So, when does anger make the jump from an emotional state or a way to forcefully express and loving purpose to a state of sinful alienation from our brothers and sisters? Let’s look at what Paul says in the reading – first, don’t let the sun go down on your anger. As anger takes up residence in our lives, expressing it becomes an end in itself rather than a means for teaching or expressing our concern.

It is easy for us to fall in love with our anger – it is so intense, so real, it makes us feel so alive. We begin to tell ourselves stories to justify it, and we begin not to solve problems but rather to plot revenge. As Paul says, when we let anger take up residence in our lives, we make room for the devil and invite him in. Paul is realistic about human nature – we can be ruled by God in Christ or we can be ruled by the devil, and that really is our only choice, if choice it is.

When we can rule our anger, we can use it as a signal to others and to ourselves, a signal that something is wrong, out of balance. It may be something in us – we are afraid or feel threatened. Or it may be in something else – someone is transgressing our boundaries or doing something dangerous or thoughtless to himself or to me. As

long as we can rule our anger, it can be a useful signal to ourselves or to others.

But when our anger rules us, then it can become idolatrous – that is, it can replace Christ as the center of our lives. How many people do you know who have not Christ but their own selfish anger at the center of their lives?

Anger takes on a life of its own, and very quickly, especially if we give it free rein. Again, Paul is wise – in this same reading, he tells us, let no evil talk come from your mouth but only what is useful for building up. Building up. What a lovely phrase! I know people who can use their anger to build people up, to remind them of to whom they belong and by whom they are claimed. But building up by anger is so difficult, so precarious. It is so easy to move from using your anger to make a point, to expressing your anger for its own purposes.

Because of the close connections between anger and sin, many of us simply refuse to express anger. You've seen these people, you may be one of them. Much of the time, I know I am. But simply suppressing our anger may not be very helpful. First of all, we aren't generally very good at completely smothering our emotions, whether they are fear or anger or love or whatever, so they come out in ways that are inappropriate or unexamined. When we smother emotions, we aren't able to examine them, so we can't master them or understand their causes, which may be important and legitimate signals.

Second, when we suppress our emotions we limit our emotional range. Kathleen Norris, one of my favorite spiritual writers talks about the dangers of what she calls *acedia*, the deadening of emotions. Over time, we can ignore our emotions so thoroughly – not just anger but also joy and concern and the whole range of emotions that makes us human – we can ignore our emotions so

thoroughly that we are no longer the free and expressive people Christ called us to be.

Surely this must be what Paul is talking about when he speaks of grieving the Holy Spirit. The Spirit set us free, freed from the powers of the devil and the powers of the world, freed to be ruled by God. Submitting to anger is returning to slavery taking the devil as our master and grieving the Holy Spirit who has freed us for better things.

When your mother told you to count to ten when you were angry, like many things your mother told you, it was good advice. The goal of counting to ten is not necessarily to become less angry than you were, although you might. The goal, instead, can be to examine *why* you are angry – is your anger rooted in a loving purpose? Is your anger based on fear? If so, is that fear realistic? Delay also gives you a moment to get your anger under control and to make your response proportionate to the provocation.

But counting to ten is not counting to ten thousand. Anger can be a useful signal for ourselves and for others, an indication that something is out of balance and needs to be addressed and quickly. Anger is part of our emotional range and it can also be part of speaking the truth in love. But stale anger, anger suppressed and cosseted or anger indulged and encouraged, these kinds of anger are the devil's plaything.

At the end of the day -- and isn't that what Paul says – *by* the end of the day, we are to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as we are forgiven. In the end, we are to imitate God, who speaks sometimes in anger but always in love. We are members of one another as Paul tells us, and so we speak the truth, in anger sometimes, but in love always.

Amen.