

Being Angry with God

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Myrick T. Cross at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, August 9, 2009.

*"Forgive our sins as we forgive
you taught us, Lord, to pray;
but you alone can grant us grace
to live the words we say."
(Gradual Hymn 674, verse 1)*

When was the last time you got really mad at someone?

Anger! One summer when we lived on Cape Cod and had packed up the family in the station wagon and were headed for our vacation in Maine, we narrowly avoided a fatal crash when an angry driver who had been trying to pass us in the right lane suddenly pulled out from behind and cut directly in front of us and slammed on his brakes. It was a dramatic example of road rage.

Anger! In one parish where I served, a small group of people were very unhappy with my leadership and scheduled a secret meeting at the local library where a letter of complaint to the bishop was composed and signed and sent. There was anger about the way I served Communion, the diversity of my musical taste, and a list of other complaints, mostly stemming from a power struggle with the organist. Malicious gossip fueled the cocktail party circuit.

Anger! At a recent Cincinnati City Council hearing, a police officer whose job is in hexapody with the imminent budget cuts, was seen to be disrespectful as he expressed anger that a councilman had stated false information about average police salaries.

Anger! In an over-the-backyard fence conversation with one of my neighbors about my sermon topic of anger, he said to me, "Come over and video my wife and me in about ten minutes. We'll give you the perfect case study."

On the crowded roads, in frustrated church communities, in economic stress in the public arena, and in our personal and family relationships, speaking the truth to our neighbors constructively is as challenging today as it was two thousand years ago.

How are we to practice discipline as members of a faith community that builds up the community, giving grace to those who hear? Can we be kind and tenderhearted as we go about our day to day business, inevitably experiencing conflict? How can anger bring us closer to God and our sisters and brothers?

In 1969 physician Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote her seminal book On Death and Dying in which she concluded that many people commonly experience five psychological and emotional stages as they approach their death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. She also saw these five stages as the normal way of healing any deep hurt or loss.

About fifteen years ago, I had the privilege of attending a week-long workshop with Kubler-Ross at her retreat center in Virginia. The workshop was called "Life, Death and Transitions," based on this same notion that traumatic changes or psychic wounds in our lives involve loss, and loss is a kind of death.

While your own journeys of healing may not appear to be neatly categorized into these five stages (which by the way are not necessarily sequential), I'll bet most of us can identify with at least parts of this process.

Ten years after Kubler-Ross's book, Jesuit priests Dennis and Matthew Linn who had first written a book titled Healing of Memories, adapted Kubler-Ross's theory of stages, in their second book, Healing Life's Hurts - Healing Memories through the Five Stages of Forgiveness. Today, I am focusing on Kubler-Ross's second stage of death and dying which the Linns call the second stage of dying and forgiveness.

St. Paul addresses anger in the early Christian community at Ephesus:

"Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.... 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."

(Eph 4.25-5.2)

One of the ways to read scripture, particularly the epistles, is to ask, "What was happening among the members of the Christian community at Ephesus that precipitated Paul's writing this letter to them?"

Thank God, Christian communities today do not have this terrible behavior going on that would cause our bishop to write us a letter like this! But this was in the olden days. And without all the modern means of communication like cell phones and twitter, people got angry. And anger was destructive to Christ's Body.

My personal understanding is that there is one energy source in all of us, and that energy is the creative love of God. I believe we were each created in that image of love and that our natural impulse is to love and to be creative. When that energy is blocked and not allowed to be expressed freely and to live, it is expressed as negative energy, or anger. And since none of us lives in a totally beautiful, naturally harmonious environment that nurtures all of our individual creative impulses, and since we cannot each have our own way, anger exists. Like lava inside a volcano, it will come out.

It is natural for us to have anger. And it is a good thing. Paul writes, "Be angry but do not sin..." What is the boundary between expressing anger appropriately, and sinning? How is anger to be a positive and constructive dynamic in a Christian community like ours?

The Bible recounts some classic stories about anger. Anger festering from some hurt probably drove the prodigal son to demand his inheritance, leave home, and drown his feelings in riotous living as told in Luke 15. The reconciliation between father and returning son is in contrast to the elder brother who at the banquet "...was angry and refused to go in." Both felt anger and there was nothing wrong with that. The sin was nursing the unresolved anger which resulted in hostility, the attitude leading to hurt another by negative humor, destructive criticism or other unloving behavior. Be angry, but do not sin.

Jesus' anger blazes forth "...where people are hurt by greedy temple sellers (Mt. 21), demons (Mt.1), hypocritical Pharisees (Mt. 15) unmerciful men (Mt. 3), unbelievers (Jn. 8), or wicked masters (Mt. 18). He doesn't just silently withdraw, swallow his anger and hope injustice will disappear." (Linn, 105)

Denying anger is unhealthy and can destroy us. Depression can be displaced anger, like suicidal Elijah under the broom tree. Identifying the proper target to whom to express the feeling appropriately, without intent to hurt and with that one's welfare in mind, can lead to healing.

Anger not only helps me love myself by pinpointing what hurts and beginning to heal it, but it also helps me love the person who hurt me.

In reflecting on the Five Stages, one can imagine making the following statements:

Denial	I don't admit I was ever hurt.
Anger	I blame others for hurting and destroying me.
Bargaining	I set up conditions to be fulfilled before I'm ready to forgive.
Depression	I blame myself for letting hurt destroy me.
Acceptance	I look forward to growth from hurt.

(Linn)

A very simplified version of the Ignatian spiritual exercises prompts us to take time at the end of the day and ask, "In what instance did I feel the strongest emotion today?" Once clearly identified, the question continues, "And how was God present in that experience?"

Some of the most stressful encounters we have bring out feelings of anger. Or as I would say, frustrated love." And these are the very opportunities for God to work in our lives to form us into whom we really are as God's maturing children.

At the Kubler-Ross workshop I mentioned earlier, we were asked to identify anger we had toward a parent or family member. In a small group we were coached to tell that person how we felt in great detail, while (are you ready for this?!) beating thick city telephone books to shreds with a piece of rubber hose. Some people beat pillows with a tennis racket; others run or work out. Children in the alcohol treatment program where I worked used to draw pictures of anger. Whatever works to help you express angry

feelings without hurting anyone can be helpful. My dad once told me to keep a sharp axe and a wood pile for times when I would get angry with my wife.

Few of us are able to express anger constructively, promptly and directly to someone who has hurt us. Usually it takes some homework and time. While Jesus teaches us to confront one who has sinned against us personally, alone at first, then with a fellow Christian, then at last resort in a group, that directive assumes that we are able to go humbly as a child, and as if seeking a lost sheep.

Dealing with anger can only become an experience of spiritual growth when we follow the prescription in the last part of Paul's sentence, "...be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." As one of the banners that hangs on the outside of the Fourth Street wall states: "Truth + Forgiveness = Reconciliation."

We must give ourselves up sacrificially, as Christ did for us, in order to discover and accept the deeper hurts in our lives that have been ignited as anger in response to a present wound. Going to God in prayer, seeking healing and the strength and courage to be forgiven and to forgive is the gift we are offered.

*"How can your pardon reach and bless
the unforgiving heart
that broods on wrongs
and will not let old bitterness depart?"*

*In blazing light your cross reveals
the truth we dimly knew,
how small the debts men owe to us,
how great our debt to you.*

*Lord, cleanse the depth within our souls,
and bid resentment cease;
then, reconciled to God and man,
our lives will spread your peace."*

(Verses 2, 3, and 4, Hymn 674)

Amen.