

PASTOR'S NOTES. Our Anger, in Life and in Faith

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. (James 1:19-20, NRSV)

I have been fascinated with the subject of anger. I suppose that this is because for so long I lived in intense anger without knowing it, and this was a substantial part of my mental illness as a teen and young adult. One of the most helpful things I learned in the process was a remark by a supervisor that all emotions are basically "mad, sad, glad, and scared." (I understand that some experts now add "disgust" to that list, but I am not yet convinced.) In other words, however we may feel or verbally express our feelings, it is still comes down to one of those four. If I say "I feel elated," it's just another way of saying I am happy or glad, and if I say, "I'm a little anxious or nervous about this," it's another way of expressing my fear.

For me, this insight helped me to begin to "get in touch" with my feelings, and learn to identify them. But early on I sensed there was something different about anger. While it is almost automatic for us to perceive something pleasant and be happy, or perceive something unpleasant and be sad, or perceive danger and be afraid, anger seems to take a little more brainwork. When I began working with abusive men in Boston (1982-83), I noticed that the men seemed to transfer all of their sadness and fear into anger. All men do this to some degree (because we are socialized to behave that way), but it is much more pronounced in abusers. As the wife of one said to me, "People don't understand him. He has just two moods, he's either happy, or he's ticked off, so as long as I can keep him happy, he's great."

Gary Chapman has written many books about the five Love Languages, but he also wrote a book called Anger (2007: Moody Publishers). I remember his definition of anger as "a violation of our sense of justice." This made sense to me, because as much as I could remember, my experiences of anger were all about something that *should not* be, like when someone cuts me off in traffic, or I believe I was treated unfairly, or I see someone doing something wrong. It also fit with the abusive men I knew. For a male raised to believe that the man is always in control, he *should not* ever be sad, and he *cannot* ever be afraid. So those feelings are almost immediately converted to anger.

With this in mind, we can probably think of many times when we got angry and it was inappropriate: I thought I saw something that was wrong, but I was mistaken; I lashed out at someone when I was actually angry about something else; or I got angry on the road because I'm the only one who needs to get somewhere on time and everyone's an idiot but me. So we can see our anger can be a bad thing. In fact, Jesus says it can make us liable to (or in danger of) judgment:

"But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matthew 5:22, NRSV)

But some of you might say, "Isn't anger sometimes justified? There are real wrongs and injustices all around us." I'm sure this makes sense to most of us; we have been taught to be angry about injustice, and we can point to many instances in the Old Testament where God is angry (as well as in the New Testament: Hebrews 3:9-11; Revelation 14:9-11) and even Jesus expresses anger at times (such as Mark

3:3-5; 8:17-18; 11:13-17). It would seem that righteous anger is not only natural, but it should be our attitude about the wrong in the world.

The problem is that this view is not supported in Scripture. A quick word search on ‘anger’ and ‘angry’ in the New Testament reveals that *every* time it refers to our anger, it is negative: Matthew 5:22; 2 Corinthians 12:20; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 4:31; Colossians 3:8; James 1:19-20. The only passage that might be an exception (but really isn’t) is

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.
(Ephesians 4:26-27, NRSV)

The consistent theme in all of these is that though anger is natural, its potential is almost always for bad. Modern research bears this out; we have found that while social media has done its best to highlight injustices, the more outraged people become (so that they might post almost endlessly about an issue), the *less* likely they are to give money or get involved with the issue in a constructive way. I suppose this is because we have bought into the idea that our moral outrage is response enough...

The danger and the lesson of our anger is that it is based on *our* sense of justice, *our* righteousness. Consider what Paul says from prison to the Philippians:

“...in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”
(Philippians 3:8b-9, NRSV)

Notice that Paul realizes that as much as he has a strong sense of what is right and wrong, his righteousness, he knows that this is not the same thing as God’s righteousness. God has a much wider perspective on the world, the totality of our lives, and loves even those we don’t. Even Jesus, when He goes to be baptized, does not accept His righteousness as final, but says “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” When He says “all righteousness,” I take this to mean that Jesus is insisting “not My will, but Thy will be done.” (Matthew 3:15; 26:39).

When we realize we are angry about something, perhaps the most important questions we can ask ourselves are, “Why am I angry about this? Why am I having this strong reaction? What’s behind this? How does this offend my sense of what is right? Is this my righteousness or God’s? And if it is God’s, am I trusting God to handle Himself what offends Him?” I could go on, and cite other examples (like the angry brother of the prodigal son, Luke 15:25-30). But for me, almost every time that I’ve asked myself these kinds of questions, it has led me to a deeper faith in God. I hope the same for you.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive style.