

ANGER MANAGEMENT

Sermon by Rev. David Robb
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Text: “Be angry, but do not sin” Eph. 4: 25

I am happy to greet you and to offer my hope that all the fathers in our midst will be appropriately appreciated and honored on this special day. I also think it my duty to bring to your attention that one of the most dangerous persons alive is a minister who has not had many opportunities to preach during the past year and is just bursting with ideas he is eager to unload. I regret to inform you that I am such a dangerous person. And I think it only fair to warn you in case you had made plans to have lunch at a reasonable hour. You may unwittingly be forced to adjust your plans somewhat.

Ernest Hemingway once described the protagonist of his story “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” in this way:

He always had a great toleration, which would have been the most interesting thing about him if it were not the most sinister

I remember a time when that description might well have served as a fairly accurate thumbnail sketch of the American national character. Americans have frequently struck the rest of the world as possessed with a gift for toleration, a robust nonchalance, a cheerful acceptance—until you hit certain nerve and inadvertently uncovered a more sinister underbelly. Well, for good or ill that more sinister quality appears to have come out of the closet, taken off the gloves, and flaunting itself in full view. Our political processes no longer even affect civil discourse. Politics in the age of Trump appears more and more to be a form of blood sport. Very little seems to matter anymore except to win at any cost. And everywhere you turn there is anger. And not just the anger of words, but anger stirred to brutal acts of violence.

This is the third summer in a row that I have been scheduled to preach on the Sunday following a mass shooting event in this country. Two years ago it was the attack on the parishioners attending a bible study class at the AME Zion Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Last summer it was the massacre by the gunman in the Orlando nightclub, Pulse. Now this past week, once again a deranged citizen opened fire on a gathering of Republican Congressmen preparing for a friendly game of baseball. I might have welcomed our president’s appeal to our common heritage and his summons to our sense of unity if not for the fact that I hold him in large measure responsible for running a campaign steeped in hatred and bigotry and stirring of the forces of hatred in this land. I am deeply saddened that his strategy seemed to have worked.

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I have no idea how you are managing to live within the narrow expectations of this new Administration, but here is a snapshot of how most of my days begin: I rise reasonably early, brew a fresh pot of coffee, then go to my front door to fetch the morning newspaper. For years I have followed this

cherished routine as a way to orient myself to each new day. These days, I pour a cup of coffee, sit down, begin to read the morning paper, and invariably start to gnash my teeth. There is, I am discovering, a great deal to be angry about. I just hope my dentist can keep one step ahead of the carnage. In the meantime, I am also discovering that anger can actually have its positive uses, even a spiritual purpose.

I am grateful to our senior minister Galen Guengerich who in a sermon here last January soon after the Inauguration brought to our attention these words of Paul Woodruff:

If you are unable to suffer anger,
you may not recognize injustice...
An individual is just insofar as his or her anger is keyed to
Injustice...
Learning to be angry better is part of acquiring justice.

There is wisdom here. We should be able to agree that a capacity for genuine anger is a necessary condition for recognizing and refusing to tolerate injustice.

This may also have been close to what the New Testament theologian, St. Paul may have had in mind when he wrote these words that appear in his letter written to an early Christian community in Ephesus located in the present-day Turkey. Here is what Paul wrote:

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth in
love to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry,
but do not sin. And do not let the sun go down on your anger.
--Ephesians 4: 25-26

“Be angry, but do not sin” (Paul was actually quoting
this phrase from one of the Psalms in Hebrew scripture).

I was never introduced to this passage as a young person. It was only as an adult that I came upon this text tucked quietly away in a remote corner of the New Testament and began to reflect on what Paul may have surmised to be the positive applications of anger. Certainly I am quite aware of where I am this morning. We are Unitarian-Universalists, and we are quite at home with our anger, thank you very much. And most of us stopped thinking about sin—if we ever gave it a second thought—a long time ago. But bear with me. I am intrigued that St. Paul managed to join anger and sin in one sentence—bound two different ideas together in a single related concept—and there may be important insight here.

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Yes, I am angry. And so are many of you. Still, we know in our heart of hearts that our anger is about something that it signifies our determination to take a stand and to be counted. And we know that our anger is not an anger that threatens violence against anyone. Like Albert Camus we too would like to be able to love our country and still love justice. In the wonderful image of one of our most beloved poets, Robert Frost, we believe what we are really having is a lovers’ quarrel with our country.

But what do we make of Paul’s entreaty: “Be angry, but do not sin.”

Allow me to prepare us by sharing a story. My very first call as a minister was as the Associate Minister of the First Congregational Church in Washington, D.C. where many years previously our 30th president of the United States—Calvin Coolidge—frequently worshipped. Coolidge had been raised a member of

the Congregational church in his native Vermont, and during his years as president in the 1920's, he frequently strolled the five or six blocks east of the White House to attend First Church. He normally attended services with his wife Grace, but one Sunday he showed up for the service unaccompanied. Afterward he returned to the White House and was greeted by his wife. Many of you already know that Coolidge was famous for his taciturn and gruff style of speech, so much so that he was popularly known as "Silent Cal." So when Grace inquired, "What did the preacher preach about today, Cal?" she was not at all surprised by his one word reply: "Sin." She soldiered on: "What did he have to say about sin, Cal?" And Cal shot back, "He were agin it!"

Since this may be the last time you ever hear any preacher utter the word "sin" in a Unitarian sermon, I thought I at least owed you the respect to alert you in advance about what you are about to confront. I feel it only fair to give you a proper warning that yes, I too am agin it.

So far I think we might be on safe ground to conclude that St. Paul might probably have agreed with Paul Woodruff that "learning to be angry better" is a valuable ingredient in the human commitment to build a more just and humane society. It is often our anger that motivates us to change what we regard as flagrantly wrong. It is our anger that stirs us to risk our comfort and privilege on behalf of those who do not share those benefits. At the same time, however, St. Paul was also savvy enough to understand that anger, left unchecked, is a dangerous commodity, one that needs to be defined, refined, and contained. That Paul perceived anger to be highly susceptible to sin means he probably understood that while anger can be a valuable servant, it is likely to be a very poor master. Anger in all of its forms always polarizes; anger usually frames things as black and white, as either/or. Anger strongly influences us to believe we are right and the other person wrong, that we are superior and the other inferior and lacking in judgment. "Be angry, but do not sin."

So the first thing we will always need to contain when we are angry is the inclination to self-righteous certitude. T.S. Eliot put it succinctly in his verse drama, *Murder in the Cathedral*, "The last temptation is the final treason: To do the right thing for the wrong reason." St. Paul was quite insightful in his insistence that, valuable as it may be, anger is also peculiarly equipped to defend us against self-critical reflection. It was another great theologian and philosopher, St. Augustine, the former Bishop of Hippo in North Africa and author of the monumental *City of God*, who may have had the most profound grasp of this peculiar vulnerability in anger. "Never confront evil," Augustine once wrote, "Never confront evil as if it arose entirely from outside of yourself." What all of these thinkers had in common was that each had a profound sense that the human psyche is deeply divided and infinitely clever in hiding this from ourselves. Nowhere is this more revealed than when we are angrily denouncing the injustice of others.

I was very privileged years ago to have as one of my teachers Rabbi Abraham Heschel with whom I learned so much about the great Hebrew prophets: Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah. A committed social activist in addition to being a magnificent teacher, Heschel was a close personal ally and friend of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. throughout the civil rights era. He would frequently remind his students that a central message of the Hebrew prophets is this: "In a free society some people are guilty, but all of us are responsible." "Be angry, but do not sin."

There is a second way in which St. Paul probably intended for us to understand the special vulnerability of anger to sin. Anger has a peculiar resistance to being relinquished; once we allow it in, it is not easy to let it go. Anger that we nourish and relish for long periods of time tends to seethe, to grow more and more desperate, entrenched, and infinitely bitter. Anger carried inside for long periods of time tend to calcify and harden, transforming from anger into bitter hatred. I am sure that is what St Paul was trying to alert us

to when he added his observation, “Therefore do not let the sun go down on your anger.” He knew that anger that is allowed to fester and rot will soon begin to take over the entire center of one’s whole personality.

Anger tends always to veer away from the precincts of love and to become tightly ensconced within the confines of hatred. Another one of my friends and mentors in ministry was the Rev. William Sloan Coffin, the former Chaplain at Yale, and former minister of the Riverside Church in New York City. Focusing also on the prophetic message, Coffin used to remind us of the deceptively simple but profound central message of the prophet Isaiah who enjoined us over and again to love the good and to hate evil. Coffin frequently went on to point out, “If all we ever manage to accomplish is to hate the evil, but neglect at the same time to love the good, all we ever are likely to become is damn good haters.” An anger that becomes little more than a thin disguise for hatred provides insufficient foundation for a moral imagination that begets a more substantive insight than judgmental moralism. It was Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the great social ethicists of the 20th century who once reminded us, “Most of the evil that occurs in this world is not the direct result of sociopathic monsters who are morally distorted to inflict pain on others. Most of the evil in this world is accomplished by reasonably decent people who do not know themselves at all well.”

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So in the first place, anger is especially vulnerable to sin when it drives us to self-righteousness, when it convinces us that we are essentially innocent while others are guilty. And second, anger is especially vulnerable to sin when it separates itself from the motive of love and embraces in its place the motive of hatred. And there is one further thing: anger is especially susceptible to sin when it distances itself from hope. For years I have been haunted by a figure that was first vividly described by the biologist Loren Eiseley in his beautiful book, *The Unexpected Universe*. There he tells of walking along a beach in Costabel that he described as:

“littered with the debris of life... Along the strip of wet sand that marks the ebbing and flowing of the tide, death walks hugely and in many forms. In the end the sea rejects its offspring. They cannot fight their way home through the surf which casts them repeatedly back upon the shore. The tiny breathing spores of starfish are stuffed with sand... The seabeach and its endless war are soundless. Nothing screams but the gulls.

Later Eiseley came upon a human figure on the beach ahead of him, stooping over a starfish.

“It’s still alive,” I said. “Yes,” said the stranger, and with a quick gentle movement he picked up the star and spun it. . .far out into the sea... “It may live,” he said, “if the offshore pull is strong enough...The stars throw well. One can help them.”

So they went along the beach stooping down to pick up a half-dead starfish and throw it back into the sea in the hope that it might live again. Later still, pondering it all, Eiseley wrote, “Somewhere...there is a hurler of stars, and he walks, because he chooses – always in desolation, but never in defeat”

An anger that distances itself from all hope is an anger that is deeply immersed in sin. An anger that has eliminated hope is an anger that is grafted to cynicism. And the problem with cynicism, as Paul Tillich once accurately pointed out, is that it creates nothing. It is itself a void, an empty space into which new absolutisms are bound to pour. Anger can be a splendid motivator; it can frequently lead one to risk moral hazard and moral imagination and energy in the service

of justice. But it will never do so if it has eliminated hope from its template. And that is why the image of Eilsley's star-thrower continues to haunt and inspire me. "Somewhere there is a hurler of stars who walks because he chooses – always in desolation, but never in defeat."

God grant that we may always be found among the star-throwers in our midst –always choosing to allow our anger to be transformed by critical self-reflection, by love, by hope. Let us vow to make appropriate use of our capacity for anger to stir us to action, to walk always in desolation but never in defeat with a steadfast, patient commitment always to the claims of justice. Amen.