

Righteous Rage and Wisdom

John 2:13-22, 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 by Patty Friesen (Mar.7/21)

In our Faith Exploration class we imagine what words we would use to describe Jesus to the five and six year old boys in the Kindergarten/Grade 1 Sunday school class. While this scenario is totally intimidating to imagine - we came up with descriptions of Jesus as the joy we feel when we see our parents or grandparents after church. Or Jesus is hungry and sad sometimes. And sometimes Jesus is angry like in today's bible story. I imagine if we asked the little boys if they ever felt angry over an injustice, they could identify with Jesus' anger. We all can. But in today's gospel story - Jesus doesn't get a time-out. He gives the temple money-lenders a time out, out in the street. It is interesting that today's gospel reading of Jesus' rage and cleansing of the temple is paired with the epistle reading on wisdom. What does Jesus' righteous rage have to do with wisdom?

Anger is as old as the beginning of time; as old as the Garden of Eden, in fact. When Eve assertively takes the fruit of the tree of life, Adam blames her and she blames the snake and God is angry with all three of them and banishes them from the garden. God's driving them from the garden in Genesis 3 kind of parallels Jesus driving the money lenders from the temple in John 2.

From Adam and Eve, we go to the second generation of anger between Cain and Abel that leads to murder and then all of humanity falls apart in violence. Sin is when anger crosses over into violence. From then on, God wrestles with God's own wrath and mercy, with grief and it's flip-side of anger over human violence. God's struggle with anger and mercy parallels the struggle of God's prophets themselves as Moses smashes the 10 commandments. Elijah smashes the altar of Baal. Jeremiah smashes pots and Jonah curses a bush. Samuel is angry with King Saul, Nathan is angry with King David, Queen Esther is angry with Haman. Paul gets mad at

Peter for his exclusion and Paul and Barnabus split up over John Mark. Eudoia and Syntyche fight as sisters in the early Philippian church.

Beverly Harrison says anger is a mode of connectedness to others and is always a vivid form of caring. We get angry because we care. As I've been telling Patrick lately, "I scold because I care." A young father of a teething infant quipped, "They totally drive you up the wall. The real surprise he says is not that there *is* child abuse, but that there isn't more of it! The balancing tension of wrath and loving-kindness runs through all our relationships. If it is not our infants, it is our teenagers or spouses or co-workers or fellow congregants. Wrath arises because something matters to us, because someone hurts us or someone/something we care about. Indeed, anger is the flip side of love. Like God, our job is to take anger seriously as a symptom of something that's wrong and then like God we struggle with how to deal with it justly and redemptively. Wrath in all its guises, from annoyance to rage cannot be banished, it can only be accepted, worked with, learned from, worked through and redeemed. (Weavings, XV:5)

We are angry because we care. We can be angry even when there is nothing to be angry about! Abbott Ammonas, a 6th century monk who lived in the Egyptian desert all by himself struggled with anger for 14 years! He had no one to blame for his anger - no spouse, no traffic, no government and yet he struggled with anger and resentment for 14 years! (Garrett Keizer, *The Enigma of Anger*, p. 61)

I think I've spent so much of my life suppressing my anger, in order to be a polite Mennonite female and that's been unhealthy. In a professor's office at seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, I was so angry. I had come to seminary with four years of pastoral experience at Portland Mennonite Church in Oregon and yet was required to do another year of supervised ministry. I couldn't verbalize how that made my previous experience feel discounted or I couldn't say how

unjust it felt or how angry I felt. It just all came out in the biggest nosebleed I've ever had - right there in front of the prof. Blood all over the office. I certainly had his attention then!

It feels redemptive just to talk about anger, God's anger and ours. As spiritual writer Kathleen Norris says in *Amazing Grace*, "Now that I appreciate God's anger more, I find that I trust my own much less. I am increasingly aware of its inconsistencies, its tendency to serve primarily as a mask for my fears. If I can remember this when I am tempted to rage, I am less likely to inflict my rage on others. The challenge is, as the scriptures say, how to be angry and not sin; how to be angry with the right person to the right degree at the right time, for the right purpose and in the right way. Even well-placed, love-filled anger can all too easily lose control.

Being mindful of our anger is an essential task in our Christian lives. Unresolved anger is destructive to ourselves and to everyone around us - damaging our personal and relational health. I think we've all seen anger's abuse and are so scared of it we try to avoid it at all costs. Especially in church, some of us were raised with an overdose of angry God theology, "we are all sinners in the hands of an angry God." The anger and violence of God may have been justified for the unredeemed anger and violence in our own families. This self-righteous rage over others' sin and injustice in society has fuelled our pacifist hearts for generations. Mennonite activist Gardner Hanks remembers a protest against the death penalty in Idaho, "I am amazed at the anger I felt and the anger I saw in other people who believed in peace. There is a fine line between righteous rage at injustice and our own possibility of violence."

Mennonite seminary professor, Ted Koontz confesses his unhealthy rage at family members. "I didn't like who I was becoming - an angry, bitter person, destructive of those near me. My anger was rooted in festering wounds. I subtly justified and excused my behaviour because I had been unjustly treated. A double confession was necessary for my transformation: confes-

sion of my sin of hurting others - not trying to justify it or minimize it and confession of my woundedness - not blaming others for hurting me. And I knew that confession had to be made specifically and to others. It was costly and painful but I did it and it was right. I knew for the first time with absolute certainty that God is gracious, powerful, able to make things new. I knew the weight of anger I had carried was lifted. I knew I would be less angry, less impatient, less abusive when I returned to my family. I knew I had forgiven, I knew I was forgiven.” (Godward, Herald Press, p. 20)

This is the beginning of wisdom - that we are unable to deal with our anger on our own. God called us in our foolish anger so that the redemption of it may bring peace to our souls and relationships. Allowing anger its rightful voice but not its abusive one takes great wisdom and confession and self-awareness and discipline.

Peace activist Thich Naht Hanh is his book *Anger, Wisdom for Cooling the Flames* suggests that when we are angry, we should take 15 minutes for intentional deep breathing or walking. It only takes 15 minutes to cool down to the point where we can compassionately listen to the person we are having conflict with. 15 minutes to cool down? It usually takes me sleepless nights and days. Thich Naht Hanh's meditation centre in France brought Palestinians and Israelis together to practice deep breathing and meditative walking. They were able to get disciplined with their anger over each other's injustice and misperceptions that they could really lean into the hopes and challenges of a Palestinian homeland.

Patrick and I have become enough aware that we head for the river either alone or together for the long walk for our short tempers. We also try to cool the flames with naps or snacks if we are hangry - a helpful new word when we feel angry because we are hungry. Or are we angry

because we are really sad or what's really behind the anger and how can we deal with it without becoming defensive or attacking? It's hard work - being angry but not sinning.

May we all get to the point of wisdom where we can dare to teach the Kindergarten Sunday school class about Jesus' anger in the temple, and our own anger in a redemptive way. Let's pray:

Gracious God, you got angry with us and tried to find a way to remedy our relationship with you and others. Thank you for Jesus who got mad when some people cheated others. Help us in our anger to know your righteousness and forgiveness and help us find constructive ways towards peace. Amen.