

“If You are Angry”  
Matthew 5:21-26  
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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The phone call came and it lasted about 3 minutes.  
When it was over, I was stunned.

I was finishing my first year of seminary. In our second year, every student had to do an internship of some type. I applied to a nearby church, very confident I would get the position. After all, this church was hiring two seminarians for the following fall.

That’s what the phone call was about—it was the pastor of that church, calling to let me know that two of my classmates were hired, but not me.

After the shock wore off, first came the hurt—how could they reject me?  
Then came the PANIC—I had no plan B, and I needed an internship.  
Then came...the ANGER...

I don’t know about you, but when I get angry, **I start having conversations with myself...**

I remember, right after the phone call, I was talking with myself NONSTOP.

First, I talked with myself about the two students who were hired.  
They’re not smarter than me, or more capable than me, I said to myself.

Then I judged the church.  
They must have poor leadership, I said to myself.  
That pastor who interviewed me didn’t have a clue, I convinced myself.

And in all my conversations with myself, it never occurred to me that the two people who got the internships were probably just a better fit for that church.

Has this kind of thing ever happened to you?  
How many of you have ever been angry?

Have you ever gone places you’re not proud of...when you got angry?

“...if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment,” says Jesus.

The topic of our sermon this morning is anger.  
Not because I’m angry with you.  
Or because I think this is an angry church.

But I do think that there’s something in our society today that’s upping the ante on ANGER.

According to one survey, in 2018, “Americans reported feeling stress, anger and worry at the highest levels in a decade...”<sup>1</sup>

Last August, an NBC/Wall Street Journal poll reported:

“...that 70% of Americans say they’re angry at the political establishment.”<sup>2</sup>

A year ago, the cover of *The Atlantic* magazine ran a headline:  
“Why Are We So Angry?”<sup>3</sup>

What do followers of Jesus do...with the anger that’s out there?  
What do followers of Jesus do...with the anger that sometimes makes a home—right here?

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I think it’s important to admit, right from the outset, that anger is not always the WRONG response to a problem. Sometimes, it’s the right response. The faithful response.

Think of Jesus in the temple, turning over the tables of the moneychangers.  
Do you think God was saying, “Now, now, Jesus, settle down...”?!!

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<sup>1</sup> “Americans Are Among the Most Stressed People in the World, Poll Finds,” by Niraj Chokshi, *The New York Times*, April 25, 2019, found at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/us/americans-stressful.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Found at <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/meet-the-press/deep-boiling-anger-nbc-wsj-poll-finds-pessimistic-america-despite-n1045916>, August 25, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> “Why Are We So Angry?” by Charles Duhigg, *The Atlantic*, January, 2019, found at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/01/charles-duhigg-american-anger/576424/>

Or consider Cecilia Munoz's story.

"I believe that a little outrage can take you a long way."

That's how Munoz began her reflection on the NPR series, *This I Believe*:

"I remember the exact moment when I discovered outrage as a kind of fuel," Munoz says. "I was seventeen, the daughter of Bolivian immigrants growing up in suburban Detroit.

"After a dinner table conversation with my family about the wars going on in Central America [at that time]...a good friend...told me that he thought the U.S. might someday go to war...in Latin America.

He looked me in the eye and told me that if it happens,  
he believes my parents belong in an internment camp  
just like the Japanese-Americans in WWII."

Munoz goes on:

"My outrage that day became the propellant of my life...

"I found jobs in the immigrant rights movement. I moved to Washington to work as an advocate. I found plenty to be angry about along the way..."

Then Munoz says something fascinating.

"Anger has a way, though, of hollowing out your insides. In my first job, if we helped fifty immigrant families in a day, the faces of the five who didn't qualify haunted my dreams at night.

She concludes:

"...it hasn't eaten me away completely..."

But she says, "I am deeply familiar with that hollow place that outrage carves in your soul."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Getting Angry Can Be a Good Thing," by Cecilia Munoz, in *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*, edited by Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, New York: Henry Holt, 2006. I am indebted to Mark Ramsey's article, "Anger, Church, and the Gospel," in *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2020, for reminding me of Munoz's reflection.

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Maybe this is why Jesus frames the question the way he does.  
Because of that hollow place.  
Because anger has something to do with our souls.

When Jesus says, “If you are angry...”  
some Christians hear those words  
and assume they mean that we should never be angry.

I don’t think that’s it.  
The question is NOT how you and I avoid anger.  
The question is what we will do with it.

“So then,” says Jesus, “when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

In other words, anger is not just emotional.  
It’s THEOLOGICAL.

According to Jesus, our anger—it doesn’t just affect other people.

It affects our relationship with God.

We do not get to separate the two,  
and put our frustration with this or that person over here,  
and our relationship with God over there.

According to Jesus, it’s all tangled up together.  
And maybe that’s a good thing.

Maybe what Jesus is telling us today is that God can work with us and  
through us,

not just when we’re joyful,  
not just when we’re generous,  
but even when we’re angry...

Let me give you an example.

It didn't happen to me, it happened with a friend.

I have a friend who, back when he was in junior high, he and his older brother decided to sneak out of the house one Saturday night. The plan was to meet another friend, who wanted to wrap a girl's house in toilet paper.

According to my friend:

“In the teenage mind, this [wrapping a girl's house in toilet paper] was a logical way to demonstrate one's affection.”

So the three of them go around toilet papering houses until late into the night. When the two brothers returned home, all the doors were locked, every light turned off. Not a good sign.

When they left the house, not every door was locked, not every light turned off. They thought their parents were asleep when they left, but maybe that wasn't true.

Time for a cover story.

The two brothers didn't want to ring the doorbell and admit to their parents what they had done, so they found a spare key hidden in the garage and snuck in through a little-used door in the back of the house. They went into the back room, turned on the tv, and decided they would pretend that they had been there the whole time.

Before long the boys' father walked in and calmly asked where they had been.

“Nowhere,” my friend lied.

As he put it:

“There is an old saying that when you find yourself in a hole, the first thing you do is stop digging. Well, [my brother] and I didn't stop digging that night. When our lie was challenged, we proceeded to tell another and then another and then another. Each new lie was more brazen than the last, and....we watched our dad become angry, and then we watched his anger grow to fury.

“We would learn too late that he had watched us walk home, toilet paper-in hand. He was just waiting for us to come clean.

“We were told to come up with punishments for his consideration and to wait while he thought about what he was going to do.”

That waiting...it didn't last for 10 minutes.

It didn't last for 10 hours.

It lasted TWO DAYS.

When their father finally spoke to them, he asked a question:

““What do YOU think your punishment should be?””

My friend and his brother decided that they would ONE-UP each other:

Grounded for a week—no, two weeks—no, a month!

And no tv! Back and forth they went...

Their father looked at them.

“Do you know the meaning of the word grace?”

“Getting something you don't deserve,” one of them replied.

“Yes,” said their father, “I think that is a pretty good definition. So I have decided to teach you both a lesson about grace. And for your punishment, that is what I am giving you. I am going to give you grace.”

End of conversation.

Their father never brought the subject up again.

“I've had a lot of time to think about this over the years,” my friend shared with me.

“In a strange way, it would have been easier if our dad had simply [responded immediately to his anger and] doled out a punishment. Grace is not easy to give and, ironically, it is not easy to receive.”

It was, according to my friend,

a transformative experience in his young life.

It changed who he was.  
 It affected him so much, you know what he and his wife decided, many years later, to name one of their daughters?

Grace.

All because his father was able to do something faithful with his anger...

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Now I know...

**Maybe you're having a conversation in your head** at this moment  
 a conversation that's going something like:

“But is it always possible?  
 Turning anger into a gift of grace?  
 Is that always the right thing to do?  
 The faithful thing to do?”

Look, I'm not saying that reconciliation is possible in every relationship.

Sometimes grace just looks like two people  
 who are no longer wounding one another,  
 even if it means there is no longer any real relationship with the other.

But a part of me also wonders if perhaps we,  
 as followers of Jesus—  
 have a particular **CALLING** in our world today.

A calling to model faithful ways to handle anger.

Think for just a moment of how you learned to deal with anger in your own life.

Did it come from reading a textbook?  
 Or taking a quiz in class?

Or did someone model it for you?



How do we become good stewards—  
     not just of our money,  
     and of our time—  
     but also...of something like anger?

In a society that loves to turn the world into EITHER/OR, us and them,  
     boxing people in or canceling them on social media...  
     what if we, as followers of Jesus,  
     are called to model something else?

Whether we're on Facebook...  
     or whether we're with our family...

A colleague of mine reports that not too long ago, he was having a conversation with a friend. This friend, a mother, described a recent evening when she was watching television with her teenage son.

She was folding laundry.  
 Doesn't remember what they were watching—it was something stupid.

And her son made some smart remark.  
 She didn't like the remark, and she scolded him.  
 Well, he didn't like being scolded, so he said something even smarter.

That really made her mad, so she REALLY scolded him.  
 And that made HIM really mad.

So he slammed his fist on the coffee table,  
     and he went upstairs to his room and slammed the door.

You know what that mother did?  
 She started talking to herself.  
 She said to herself, "Well, you can just stew in your own juices!"

But then something told her that nothing was more important at that moment than making peace with her son. So she stopped talking to herself.

And she put down her laundry, and put down her pride,

and went upstairs...and made peace.<sup>6</sup>

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You know what's fascinating to me?

I have no idea who that mother is.  
I have no idea who her son is.

But they are a MODEL for me...

Maybe the next time you're angry, you'll remember that mother, who put down her pride and went to her son.

Or maybe you'll remember that father of my friend, who taught his son a lesson about grace. And God took that lesson about anger and grace, that faithful FIRST STEP....and God did something beautiful.

Heck, was just trying to be a good dad that day.  
He had no idea he was naming his granddaughter that day.

What would happen,  
if the next time you're mad—  
and you KNOW you're in the right...

what if you put down your pride,  
and you stopped talking with yourself,  
and you took a faithful first step?

Do you think God might do something beautiful through you?

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> I heard this story in a sermon given by the Rev. Dr. Tom Long a few years ago.