

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 12 AUGUST 2012, PENTECOST 11

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Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2

Psalm 130

John 6:35, 41-51



“Anger management”

Anger is an emotion most of us will be familiar with. It is a mechanism that helps ensure survival and spurs us on to remove barriers to desired outcomes. It is however also something that can deteriorate into behaviour that is destructive towards others and/or ourselves. Because it can become such a destructive force, society, our community, has put all sorts of safe guards and mechanisms in place that will keep us from acting out any destructive tendencies that may surface when we get angry. Safe guards and mechanisms that are there to help us cope constructively with anger and frustration when we encounter it and keep us from harm. From early on we are taught to “count to ten”, “to take a deep breath”, “to keep things in perspective”, to go and “cool down first” when we feel anger welling up inside us. Or to put into practice what Seneca, a Roman Philosopher who lived in Jesus’ time already said: “the greatest remedy for anger is delay”

Be angry but don’t sin, says Paul, accepting anger as a human emotion most of us will be subject to, but putting a boundary around it: Anger is ok, but it’s not when it deteriorates into sin.

That however is easier said than done.

There are many theories as to how we best control our anger and use the energy it releases into something positive rather than negative. Most of them agree that delaying a response is usually a good idea. Except when someone or something poses a threat that may do serious harm to you or your life and immediate action needs to be taken to protect yourself. And there of course the difficulties start to arise: It is not always clear when the threat justifies immediate action or not. We may act too fast, or, if we get too well trained in delaying or repressing our response, we may end up laying ourselves open to abuse and hurt that could have been prevented.

There is a lovely story I found which illustrates this:

There was once a cobra who had a bad habit of attacking people as they made their way to a local temple. Eventually the villagers became fearful and refused to go to worship. A wandering Swami was aware of the problem and decided to intervene. He confronted the animal and used a magic mantra to persuade the snake that biting people was wrong, and that he should promise never to do it again. Once it became known that the snake had somehow been made passive the villagers were no longer afraid, and it was not long before the village boys were dragging the poor snake along as a plaything. When the Swami passed that way again he called the snake to see if he had kept his promise. He saw that the snake was

bleeding and beaten and he asked how this had come about. The snake was in tears and blurted out that he had been abused ever since he had been forced to make his promise to the Swami. "I told you not to bite," said the Swami, "but I did not tell you not to hiss."

In other words: be angry, but do not sin. If we unlearn how to hiss, we may end up like the snake: Battered and bruised.

Anger is a healthy emotion. It is a response to the threat of being hurt or being frustrated at attaining an outcome or some goal that is important to us. It provides us with energy, focus and mobilises the tools we have at our disposal to defend ourselves or remove barriers to outcomes that are desirable.

But do not sin.

Anger has a place, and it certainly and undeniably has a place in scripture. Prophets like Amos and John the Baptist rage against the unholy practices of their times in no uncertain terms. What we encounter in their words is far from meek and mild – on the contrary. To address the religious leadership of your day with "brood of vipers" or women as "Cows of Bashan" is hardly polite. (*The expression cows of Bashan is used by the prophet to address the wealthy women of Samaria, who demand that their husbands satisfy their cravings. The derogatory language suggests that they, like the livestock of Bashan, were well fed, ironically in preparation for the coming slaughter.*)

God is reported to lose his cool at times breathing fire and brimstone, shaking the earth and moving the heavens as she does. And Jesus, in his images, rages through the temple precincts overturning tables and using a whip to remove hapless retailers from their stalls.

When scripture talks anger, it talks about rage, about retaliation, about revenge, about violent action, about thunder and lightning, and deep felt, unbridled emotion. Letting loose more than what most of us, in an attempt to be imitators of a meek and mild Christ, would be in the process of suppressing.

Be angry, but don't sin.

What happens when we suppress our anger? Thanks to a Christian tradition that has told us to be nice and forgiving at all times, we know all too well what happens. There are several options and none of them are healthy. Repressed anger can go underground where it is stored for future reference. It festers away, embitters, and any time something else happens to annoy us that festering, bitterness grows until we either blow our top completely at a seemingly small provocation, and/or vent our anger on someone or something unrelated. Or, over the years, with a happy smile, we learn how to spirit "bad feelings" away and hurt ourselves by making ourselves feel we or our feelings are not worth protecting or caring for and end up vulnerable, depressed, and with low self esteem because we have learned to confuse the perfectly healthy, justified and justifiable anger we feel with the sin Paul tells us not to commit.

Let us try to further clarify the issue. There is anger as a felt emotion and an acting out of that emotion. As far as the emotion goes, we don't have a choice. We are angry at times, it is part of our natural human responses to threat and frustration of ambitions

and aspirations. But as adults we have a choice as to what we will do with the energy this emotion releases in us. In other words: As adults we are responsible for what we do with our anger. We can assess the situation and make a choice. The choice not to sin, not to harm, not to retaliate, to look for more constructive responses to that emotion than bitter words or aggressive behaviour. Most of the time that will be more appropriate than letting ourselves go. Most of the time. But not all of the time. There are times, and the bible is full of examples of it, when something the Buddhists call “fierce compassion” is called for. When a calm and measured response may not do the job, or when the threat or harm is of such proportions a more violent response is appropriate.

Is violence ever justifiable? We are on very thin ice here, but I think there is evil that needs to be met with more than gentle smiles and friendly attempts at understanding and discussion of the issues. Having said that: I am equally convinced that the use of any violence, including justified, righteous expressions of anger, are always going to hurt the person enacting these expressions as much if not more than the persons who may be stopped in their tracks or receive punishment for their behaviour in that way.

What I like about the Buddhist idea of “fierce compassion” is that it acknowledges the need to be fierce at times. Fierce like the prophets were against the abuse of power by religious authority and the bleeding dry of those already poor and destitute by the wealthy. There is nothing wrong with being vocal about blocking bullies from having their way. Fierce like God is recorded to be when the vulnerable aren’t looked after and the earth and its people are raped and plundered. But compassionate, looking at the other as another mortal like you who in the end can’t save him or herself, even if they tried. Who need God’s love and compassion as much as you do. Anger yes, but never forget you’re dealing with someone like you. Don’t swallow, but think before you act. Anger yes, sin, no.

An even more important reason to learn how to manage our anger, how to choose the right response to a strong emotion that can easily overwhelm us if we let it, is the fact that if we don’t we may not only end up hurting others, but we may hurt ourselves. And that, too is sin. Sin because as much as the other person we are asked to love in imitation of Christ, we are people God loves and Christ offers himself to us as living bread ourselves.

If we store up our anger we can easily become people that carry an aura of bitterness and indignant self righteousness around with them everywhere they go. People who feel they have been wronged so many times they have lost count and are experienced by others as constantly on the lookout for opportunities to vent their frustration and anger. People like that have their insides burning with resentment and seem to draw more reasons for resentment and bitterness to them like magnets. And it becomes very difficult for someone like that to be at peace, or feel content . And over time life will become very painful for people who live like that, even at the best of times.

An apocryphal conversation from the native American tradition, between the old Cherokee and his grandson illustrates this well. The old man is reported to have said: “Inside everyone there is a terrible fight going on between two wolves. One is evil, full of anger, greed, arrogance, resentment, and ego. The other is good, full of joy, peace, love, generosity and compassion. This same fight is going on inside you, and inside all of us.

The grandson thought about it for a long while, and then asked his grandfather, 'Which wolf will win?'
The old Cherokee simply replied, 'The one you feed.'"

What you feed will grow. That goes for bitterness and resentment, but it also applies to self esteem and happiness. The anger we feel needs attending to, lest we hurt others by our expressing of it, now or later, but also so we don't hurt ourselves by denying or repressing it. Be angry - but do not sin - against your neighbour, or against yourself. Amen.

References:

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