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Ephesians 4 and 2 Samuel 18
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In our Ephesians scripture today, I found myself drawn to the verse: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.” I even went to check out some other translations of that verse and found this in The Message: “Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don’t use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don’t stay angry. Don’t go to bed angry. Don’t give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life.”

I think this verse caught my eye first because it made me wonder about what exactly was going on in Ephesia – the community to whom Paul was writing. All the things he seems to need to tell them makes one wonder a bit about what the heck is going on there. Paul wrote not just about anger but included instructions that they should speak truth to each other, not steal, share what they have, not let their words tear people down, be kind to one another. But there is the part about anger...be angry but do not let your anger make you sin. Sounds like things weren’t all sunshine and roses back in Ephesia.

Which, I get. And I think secondly this verse stuck out to me because it doesn’t take much looking around to be able to see all kinds of anger today. There is plenty of anger in the way people drive and talk to customer service employees. Anger drives the rising numbers of people affected by domestic violence. Anger is all over social media. Anger shows up in random experiences of people yelling at each other in stores or parking lots or on airplanes. These days people are angry about vaccines and masks and all kinds of things related to covid, not to mention politics, race relations, climate change, and just

the regular stuff that happens in life. So, you don't have to look very far to be able to see expressions of anger boiling over into people's behavior – you might even find that you are angry yourself.

When I was younger, I probably would have told you I didn't get angry hardly ever. But this was a misunderstanding of anger. I thought anger was yelling or slamming doors or calling someone nasty names. But it turns out that that is just one expression of anger. And in fact, we all feel anger sometimes. It is a basic human emotion with lots of different ways it can be expressed. For some, anger is hidden away and never admitted to anyone and covered up with a smile. For others, anger means silent treatments or cutting people out of their lives. Still others, do express anger through yelling or saying hurtful things. And, then there are those who express anger through violence or destruction or revenge.

And just as there are a lot of ways to express anger, there are just as many causes of our anger. Sometimes our anger is totally justified – righteous anger – anger at something truly unjust. But, sometimes, we lash out in anger without much justification – maybe we are tired, hungry, or upset about something else. Sometimes our anger is just covering up other emotions we don't want to deal with like fear, anxiety, jealousy, shame, grief. And sometimes our anger is just about our own insecurities or a sense of entitlement.

Author and researcher Brene Brown wrote about anger in her book Braving the Wilderness where she says that often our anger is masking pain. Brown says, "Almost everyone I've ever interviewed or known will tell you that it's easier to be pissed off

then it is to be hurt or scared.”¹ No matter what is at the root of our anger, if we don’t deal with it; if we don’t try to understand it, if we don’t do something with it, we can end up causing a great deal of suffering that extends far beyond ourselves.

The scripture today from Samuel is a great example of this. If when Ammon had committed the act of violence against Tamar the royal family had dealt with their pain their story might have gone a very different way, but the pain was allowed to fester and grow and grow as anger. Which is how they find themselves in the sad state of the scripture we read today. David’s soldiers killed Absalom even though he asked them not to and David finds himself in a deep, deep grief over the loss of his son Absalom and all that’s led up to it. The scripture doesn’t even mention all the soldiers’ families who must now grieve for their lost sons. Not to mention the damage done between neighbors and communities who had been forced to take sides and been pitted against each other. All this destruction because David would not deal with the pain and anger Ammon caused.

Paul tells us there is a place for anger. There are times when we will and even should be angry. Anger, when it is righteous, is a great fuel for creating action to change. But anger always needs, a preferably healthy, outlet. If we just sit in our anger, we can easily end up creating destruction. When we are angry, destruction can feel good – slamming things, cutting someone off, saying the hurtful thing, making someone else feel what you feel, getting revenge. This is what Paul warns about – feeling our anger and allowing it to take us down unhealthy paths of destruction.

¹ Brown Brené. (2019). *Braving the wilderness: The quest for true belonging and the courage to stand alone*. Random House.

Brene Brown says, “it’s critical to recognize that maintaining any level of rage, anger or contempt over a long period of time is not sustainable.”² In other words, anger will eventually become something else – resentment, revenge, other kinds of pain. Which connects to Paul’s exhortation to not let the sun go down on our anger – not to let our anger keep hold over us. We may not always be able to forgive someone in 24 hours. We may still feel angry over multiple suns rising and setting. But the longer we hold onto that anger, the more likely it will drive us to sin – to revenge – to violence – to permanent damage in relationships – to the problem multiplying and bringing other people into its orbit.

Brown says, “Anger is a catalyst. Holding on to it will make us exhausted and sick. Internalizing anger will take away our joy and spirit; externalizing anger will make us less effective in our attempts to create change and forge connection. It’s an emotion that we need to transform into something life-giving: courage, love, change, compassion, justice. Or sometimes anger can mask a far more difficult emotion like grief, regret, or shame, and we need to use it to dig into what we are really feeling. Either way, anger is a powerful catalyst but a life-sucking companion...Anger that is never transformed becomes resentment and bitterness.”³

² Brown Brené. (2019). *Braving the wilderness: The quest for true belonging and the courage to stand alone*. Random House.

³ Brown Brené. (2019). *Braving the wilderness: The quest for true belonging and the courage to stand alone*. Random House.

So, how do we transform our anger into something more life-giving? Well, there are multiple ways anger can be transformed:

First, we can pay attention to our anger and ask what is behind it. When we feel anger coming on, we can ask ourselves: Is this anger justified or is it because we are afraid? Or feeling ashamed about something? Are we feeling defensive because we are insecure? Is this anger coming out of unresolved grief? Or do we need to stop and eat or take a nap or get some distance from the situation?

A friend of mine recently told me a story about how he was out riding his bike and he was listening to a baseball game on his headphones. Something exciting was happening in the game and he got caught up and just blew through a stop sign. A driver yelled out his window at him and called him a nasty name. My friend's gut reaction was anger at being called a nasty name and so he turned around and headed back ready to confront the driver. But as he approached the driver, he realized he didn't really know what he was going to do and so he yelled back saying "you can't call me that." The driver looked surprised and instead of escalating, he said, "you're right. I was wrong about that." And then my friend took a second and then said, "yeah, well I was wrong about blowing through the stop sign." The driver said, "ok." My friend said, "ok." Then they just looked at each other for a minute and finally the driver said, "well, are we good then?" My friend said, "we're good then." And they both wished each other a nice day and moved along.

I thought it was an interesting story because we've all heard stories like this where people just yell at each other and say all kinds of more nasty things. We've heard stories that escalate to violence. But in this case, the driver just admitted that he was wrong. They both seemed to understand that the driver had been really scared that he almost

hit my friend and it made him mad and his anger took over and he yelled out that nasty name. And my friend was able to calm down and acknowledge the wrong he had done. And by both admitting that their anger became something else – it transformed.

I'm not trying to say all our anger can be resolved and transformed that easily. There is much greater pain and much deeper hurt in our lives than a close call traffic accident. But, if we can think about our anger as a sign that something more is going on and work to uncover what that is, then we will have a much better chance of resolution and transformation in something positive rather than destructive. And if we can recognize anger and be intentional about choosing what we will do with it and finding healthy outlets and paths for it – working for change, confronting injustice, dealing with our underlying emotions, talking things out with people – then our anger can become a catalyst for good.

Another thing we can do when we notice we are angry is what Paul says right before he talks about anger in Ephesians – we can speak the truth to our neighbors. Anger often comes because we aren't willing to be honest with each other. We bottle up our feelings. We don't address disagreements or when we do get into disagreements, we aren't truly listening to the other person but just waiting to make our point. We don't tell someone when they've hurt our feelings but instead let our hurt feelings fester. And eventually, that all builds up until we boil over in anger. So learning to speak the truth to each other - to address things as they come up, to listen with the intention of better understanding, to work on being as truthful and clear as we can, are all vital steps in the transformation of anger.

And one more suggestion, though there are certainly others, of how we can find healthy outlets for our anger is found in what Paul says in a later verse of this passage: "be kind

to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” When we feel anger, our faith reminds us that we are called to forgive each other. Now, forgiveness is not about saying the wrong that has been done was ok. Forgiveness holds people accountable. Forgiveness expects there will be change – that the person being forgiven will not keep doing the hurtful thing. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting like nothing ever happened. Forgiveness doesn’t say that you weren’t rightfully angry. But forgiveness is a way to let go of the tight hold we have on anger, or rather, the tight hold anger sometimes has on us. And forgiveness is never something we have to do alone but is one of the greatest partnerships we can have with God – asking God for the ability to forgive, asking God for the strength to forgive, asking God to show us the path that will lead to forgiveness.

So, my polite Midwestern friends, this sermon, which is based in scripture, is saying it is ok for you to feel your anger. Just don’t stop and sit in anger. Get to the bottom of your anger and let it be transformed into better action – forgiveness, tenderheartedness, truth telling, working for change and justice, uncovering our deeper feelings. Be resolute in not allowing anger to be a life-sucking companion but allow it to be the powerful catalyst for good that it can be. Amen.