

Forgiveness sets us free from hurt and on the path to being reasonable with each other

Sermon by Andy Wurm, Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, 12th August 2018

‘Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.’ These words from St Paul are traditional injunctions which he has put together and given a Christian motivation. Anger is certainly part of everyday life, so dealing with it should be part of common sense, but does our faith have anything extra to add?

Anger can be found throughout the stories of the bible. There are many occasions in which God is angry at individuals or nations, especially Israel. The reason being Israel’s breaking of the covenant, by worshipping idols or treating its citizens unjustly. God’s anger is the other side to God’s love – either God’s love for the poor and vulnerable who are mistreated, or God’s love for Israel, which is hurting itself through its own stupidity.

In today’s Old Testament passage we hear what happens when unresolved anger is given free reign. King David’s son Absalom was angry with his father, for failing to take action in response to his half-brother raping his sister. Taking matters into his own hand, Absalom unleashes his anger by killing his half-brother. Angry about that, his father, didn’t speak to him for two years. Absalom’s anger rises to a passion, resulting in a plan to overthrow his father and take control of the kingdom. There are many skirmishes, until finally the two sides come face to face in a contest for the crown. The king is determined to win the fight, but still loves his son, and so orders his men to deal gently with Absalom if they meet him in battle. Unfortunately, not all his soldiers share that love, and Joab, remembering when Absalom set fire to his field, ignores the king’s orders and kills Absalom. King David is shattered at the loss of his son.

There we have anger at its best and worst. Absalom’s anger at the rape of his sister, which initially drove him to seek justice for her, but from then on, everyone’s anger led to violence and ultimately, misery.

Anger is a powerful emotion. It motivates us to change something we’re not happy with. That can be a good thing. Just as the bible presents God’s anger being stirred up by injustice, so too God’s Spirit can stir us up from within, and lead us to work for change. Often the anger of individuals at their own experience of injustice motivates them to work for change that will also benefit others.

Anger rising within us can also motivate us to change ourselves. We can feel angry about how we are treated, or even how we treat ourselves, and our anger drives us to do something about it. Or constant anger about something we cannot change may eventually lead us to acceptance as the way to achieve inner peace. Hopefully when we find ourselves angry at our own imperfections, we’ll eventually choose acceptance and self-love which leads to inner peace, rather than clinging to unreasonably high standards for ourselves.

When it comes to nations and communities, conflict will never be far away. King David’s story reminds us that anger can often be part of family life too. We may be surprised when anger emerges and conflict grows, and yet it is as normal as breathing. In the church we tend to be uncomfortable about anger because we think God wants us all to be nice to each other. That’s true, but it doesn’t mean we should shun anger and avoid conflict. It just means we should be angry and manage conflict in a loving way. The New Testament shows us that conflict was present amongst the early Christian communities.

That shouldn't surprise us. What might surprise us is that through love and forgiveness, that anger and conflict was not as destructive as it could have been. A good example is St. Paul who was savagely criticised and attacked by enemies within the Christian community of Corinth. His response was to remind the community of their good qualities. How was he able to be so unaffected by such an attack, and respond with praise and encouragement? It was through forgiveness. The power of forgiveness was enormous and must not be underestimated, because it was one of the major driving forces behind the growth of early Christianity. To understand the power of that forgiveness, we have to realise it's not just about being big-hearted. It's not a matter of one person's love being bigger than another's failing. It's to do with the forgiveness of sin.

Paul came from an environment in which sin involved breaking laws. According to that way of seeing things, his enemies were sinners and should be punished. At the very least, they had broken the unwritten rule of being civil to others. But Paul was no longer run by that way of seeing things, instead, he let an alternate way of seeing things direct him. In that new way, sin was rejecting God, and that was something which everyone is caught up in, yet God does not hold it against us, but forgives us. From this perspective, everyone is in the same boat, so Paul saw himself and his enemies as the same.

When we see forgiveness is about being big-hearted, it can get us into trouble, because we may be attempting something which is going against what we hold dear. As Christians though, the ability to forgive comes from committing to a different framework of seeing and behaving which most of the world operates with. When Jesus asks us to forgive our enemies, he's not asking us to try harder than others in our loving, rather, he's asking us to first adopt a new worldview, in which forgiveness makes sense and is even desired.

Forgiveness is the best way of dealing with unresolved anger, which can be very powerful. Simmering away, unresolved anger can turn a person passive-aggressive, making them into a smiling assassin, nice and respectable on the outside, but mean on the inside. Unresolved anger can also make a person straight out aggressive - like the captain in *Moby Dick*, who drives his crew to unreasonable ends, in order to kill the whale that injured him. There is collateral damage from unresolved anger. And often it is the next generation. If we don't transform our pain, we will transmit it to others. Look at Ireland, the middle east and many other communities around the world. Look at the children of alcoholics, or the children of victims of war. It is our responsibility to heal our pain (with its associated anger), so that we don't pass it on to others. Letting the sun go down on our anger means letting it fester and grow, or bottling it up so that it's growing pressure eventually forces it to be unleashed.

Unresolved anger makes room for the devil, because that sort of anger provides energy, which can easily turn into violence. *Goodwin's Law*, applying to discussions on the internet, says that 'as an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches'. In other words, if an online discussion goes on long enough, eventually someone will compare something or someone to Hitler or Nazism. What's underneath that sort of behaviour? The same as road rage, the same as our inability to have reasonable rational political or religious debates - unresolved anger and inability to enter into conflict in a constructive manner. Another name for the devil is *the Adversary*. When we see those we're in conflict with as rivals, when we treat them as adversaries, we make room for the devil and push God out. We need to stop hurting one another and relate to one another more constructively. Forgiveness is the start of that.

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