

THE INDEX OF CHARACTER
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Reading: Ephesians 4: 25-32 (NRSV)

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather, let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us.

The Pauline letter of Ephesians offers a cosmic vision of human reconciliation.

Ephesians envisions not only the unification of the Gentiles with the Jews but of harmony throughout the universe. The author believes the church is God's vehicle for this unity and pacification. Such a hope for the world is a new vision for humanity on both the personal and global level. The passage that I just read to you is found in the last half of the letter, which is focused on practical instructions for the Christian faithful. In other words, if we are creatures of God's new world order our behavior toward one another is also new. There is an index of character that is found in the community of Christ in chapters four through six.. The characteristic that I want to focus on this morning is anger. What does anger look like in the community of faith? How is it expressed, and when does it become problematic both for ourselves and our neighbors?

Now before I begin, let me be clear that we are not going to be talking about anger from a psychotherapeutic perspective. I will not offer a Freudian view of anger or try to analyze its conscious or subconscious themes. Neither will this be very instructive for those who require anger management, which I hope will not make you angry. I am going to be talking about anger as an issue for the community of faith. How we use anger is a moral issue between Christians and their neighbors.

Anger is a fairly common theme throughout the Bible. Everybody in the Bible, just like you and me, gets angry. God, Moses, David, and even Jesus get angry. Anger is understood to be a normal human emotion. Anger is not sin. In fact, anger in the Bible is morally neutral. Anger may not feel good to us, whether we are the one delivering the anger or receiving it. We may not like the climate of anger, but in and of itself anger is neither good nor bad. Anger is one of many emotional responses within the human heart that are normal and natural. There is no shame in being angry. In fact, anger might save your life or the life of someone you love.

The challenge for us is always how we express our anger and what it may do to ourselves and our neighbors. Ephesians suggests to us that the problem with anger is threefold. Anger distorts. Anger distorts and distortion always leads to injustice. Distorted justice fixates us on the past, which is contrary to the Christian community that focuses on the future.

Anger distorts. When anger flashes from our hearts the minds begin to work the wrath into images and words that characterize our adversary. It is seldom, if ever, a true or complete representation of the person or event that has made us so mad. We cast and recast the person and the situation into descriptors that are not exactly truthful or factual. We use hyperbole to exaggerate what happened and who did it. Let me offer you an example.

One of my boys, who was about nine years old, came home from school with a note that he was suspended for three days. The offense was the fact that he had taken a pocket-knife to school. As it turned out he was showing his knife to some of his buddies on the playground. In playing with the knife one of the boys was cut, deeply enough to require stitches.

Of course I was not informed about this until after I received a letter in the mail that my child was being suspended from school. In fact, the incident was over a week old. After I received the notice of suspension I called the school administrator. Now you can imagine in this day and time that this is not the kind of situation that a school principle wants to have to deal with. Think of the shock of blood, medical treatment, phone calls to the wounded child's parents, and mounds of paper work.

When I managed to get on the phone with the principal I explained that I was calling to learn all of the particulars, including the depth of the wound, insurance questions, and suspension details. I made it perfectly clear that I held my son responsible and was not protesting the consequences of his behavior. She snapped at me, "Well I certainly hope not. After all, your son was involved in a knifing at a public school."

Now that is when I got angry. I replied to her, "Excuse me, madam, but your use of the word "knifing" suggests an intentional act on my son's part to stab a child. Is that what you are suggesting?"

There was a long pause on the end of the line. She said, "No, that is not what happened."

I can certainly understand her anger. But you can see in this example how quickly we distort the truth when we choose inflammatory language to express our anger.

We can all think of personal experiences when anger distorts the truth. It is common in nearly every personal argument, family feud, workplace brouhaha, divorce, and civil disturbance. Anger distorts!

Distortion inevitably leads to injustice. As soon as we mischaracterize a person and malign their motives and behaviors we have unfairly represented them to ourselves and others. We are no longer in a right relationship with them. Our actions have disjointed ours and their relationships with others in the community.

On September 16, 2009, Rush Limbaugh stated on his radio show that former president Jimmy Carter is “the nation’s hemorrhoid, and we don’t have a tube of Prep H big enough to deal with it.” Responses to Mr. Limbaugh have included such comments as “Well, then you must be the nation’s biggest brain tumor,” and many others¹ But you see how words spoken in anger distorts both personalities. And one can only observe that neither Mr. Limbaugh’s comments about Mr. Carter are just, nor are the comments made by the public about Mr. Limbaugh just. Both are immoral.

Profound injustice occurs when we allow our language to distort other persons in a way that maligns their character, sullies their reputation, and belittles their dignity. When we make other human beings into fools, morons, ogres, and monsters we do so with the expectation that they will lose their place within the community or be punished. We mean for them to no longer be in legitimate relationship with ourselves or anyone else. We expect our language to master them or to put them down or to put them in their place.

¹ See “Media Matters for America,” at <http://mediamatters.org/mmtv/2009009160016>.

We all have the language skills that are powerful enough to assault another human being, disable them, and devastate them. That is what happens when anger directs the language. The result is always unjust and immoral. Anger uses words to get even, attempt to regain control, and sometimes obscure the truth about our own vulnerability. Let's be honest, nothing makes us so angry as an uncomfortable truth about ourselves. The problem is that getting even, regaining control, and hiding the truth creates inequities and distorts human relationships.

Anger distorts. Distorted anger is inevitable unfair and unjust. Distorted anger lives in the past. The writer of Ephesians said it very simply, "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger..." We can be angry but do not tell falsehoods and do not be vicious. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. What ever issues you have with your brothers or sisters, mothers or fathers, friends and associates resolve them today. If we do not then we have to deal with them the next day, the next day, and *ad infinitum*. When we carry anger from the past into the future we pollute the future with all of the acrimony, distrust, and anxiety that corrupted the past. With our eyes on what "he did" or what "she said" we are not able to live in the present moment or enjoy the relationships that are right in front of us. Because we have not resolved our anger the future becomes distorted and a place of continuing injustice.

That is not the action of the Kingdom of God. Perhaps the world works on a tit-for-tat, one-ups-man-ship, and get even basis. Without a doubt there are people, corporations, social service agencies, governments, and even churches that operate on a model of anger, distrust, and blame. But if we are marked by the sign of Christian baptism we disown such attitudes and behaviors. We put off the anger and put on the mantle of kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiving one another just as we have been loved by God.

We do not let the sun set on our anger, our disappointments, frustrations, fears, and wrangling. In the morning there will be a new day dawning. There will be new opportunities to encounter the creation and the Creator. The morning will bring fresh opportunities to serve the needs of others and meet the face of God in our children, friends, colleagues, even strangers. The Kingdom of God, and the church who is called to proclaim it, faces forward. The Kingdom of God will not be anchored down by previous wounds, but rather will face the future.

If you are back in yesteryear still fighting it out with old so-and-so, you are missing the train of grace. If you are still reframing the argument and making up better points to score with that scoundrel such-and-such, you are missing the ship of hope that sails every morning. If you are sharpening the knives of revenge, posting anger notes on Facebook, or blogging someone's character assassination, you are missing the freedom that breaks with every rising sun.

The Christian community is called to meet the future.

Let me tell you a little story about how anger and the setting sun. There were two men who were actually very good friends. They were walking together in the desert when they got into a very angry argument. It got so heated that one man slapped the other across the face. Tom was shocked that his friend would do such a thing. He immediately knelt down in the sand and wrote these words: "Today my best friend slapped me in the face."

His friend, John, watched Tom writing in the sand but was too far removed to read the words.

Late in the afternoon they arrived at an oasis. Both were quite hot and dirty and decided to take a bath. Tom was splashing about when he noticed that the floor of the oasis was slipping

beneath him and not letting him go. He called out to John for help. Without a second of hesitation John went to help his sinking friend.

After recovering from his near drowning John observed Tom etching something on a large stone. He wrote, "Today my best friend saved my life."

John was overcome by curiosity. He approached Tom and said, "After I slapped you I saw you writing in sand. After I pulled you out of the oasis I saw you writing in stone. What are you doing?"

Tom replied, "When someone is angry with us and hurts us we should write it down in sand where the winds of forgiveness will blow it away. When someone does something good for us we should engrave it in stone where no wind can erase it."

Such is the Kingdom of God and to such the Christian community is called. The small daily gestures of love and forgiveness, the determination to speak the truth with love, and the ever present hope that our children will be safe are the signs of the Kingdom. When father and son are reconciled, when a child lives through the first breakup with a sweetheart, and when an old one slips gently into the arms of eternity the Kingdom of God is before us. The Christian faith always looks forward. This poem by Sheenagh Pugh, entitled, "Sometimes:"

Sometimes things don't go, after all,
 from bad to worse. Some years, muscadell
 faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail,
 sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from war,
 elect an honest man; decide they care
 enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
 Some men become what they were born for.

Sometime our best efforts do not go
 amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.

The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.²

We can only see such grace with our eyes open, facing forward. No one enters the Kingdom by looking backward or driving by the rear-view mirror of anger. The “Sometimes” of Pugh’s poem only happens in this time we call today. “Sometimes” only happens when we look forward.

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² Sheenagh Pugh, “Sometimes,” published in *Good Poems* selected and introduced by Garrison Keillor (New York: Viking, 2002), p. 215.