Sermon Series: Disordered Love
Sermon Title: Anger or Wrath **David Hockett**
Proverbs 29:11 and Ephesians 4:25-5:2 **March 26, 2017**

Jesus got really angry. Do you remember? It was on Palm Sunday; he rode into town, into Jerusalem, and was hailed by the crowds as King of the Jews. He made his way to the Temple where upon seeing the money changers, who were taking advantage of people and profiting from those who came to pray and worship, Jesus became furious. He turned over their tables and drove them all out of the Temple and then said, "You've turned a place of prayer into a religious market." He was really angry. So, if it's good enough for Jesus, for our Lord, what's wrong with me getting angry from time to time? Right? Isn't that how it works? If Jesus did it then so can we?

Unlike lust, or gluttony, or greed, or some of the other ways love becomes disordered – anger is not always a sin. There are plenty of examples in Scripture where anger seems not only allowed but called for, necessary even. God becomes angry with Israel and Israel repents and returns to God. God's children are to mirror God's righteous indignation at injustice and sin. John the Baptist expresses anger at the hypocrisy and indifference of the religious leaders. So, there are ways in which, and circumstances under which anger may be ok.

There are also plenty of examples in Scripture for when anger is condemned, passages that warn us about the dangers of anger. From the wisdom literature, "Do not be quick to anger, for anger resides in the heart of fools." (Ecclesiastes 7:9) And from Paul, "But now you must get rid of all such things - anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth." (Colossians 3:8) And I'm sure that we can certainly think of examples from our own experience for ways in which anger distorts our ability to love well. So, it's very important that we are clear about what we mean when we refer to anger as an expression of disordered love.

The fourth century desert father Evagrius calls anger "the most fierce passion". The early Christian writers believed that anger is more destructive of our ability to love well than any other expression of disordered love. Anger can be toxic. We fly off the handle and say things we later regret. We see our neighbor with whom we are angry as an adversary to be vanquished rather than a fellow child of God made in God's. Rather than using our words to build up, to speak truth in love into the lives of others, anger leads us to use our words as a weapon to cut, and undermine, and belittle, and even destroy.

Toxic anger is selfish. It is focused on me, my needs, my advantage, and my desire to return hurt for hurt, to settle the score, and to get even. Toxic anger is not about loving others, it's about controlling others, and manipulating others, and damaging others.

"Toxic anger, concerns primarily that anger that arises out of injuries we have suffered, or think we have suffered from others, and which can so possess us that anger becomes a permanent disposition of our hearts, needing very little to set it off. The very thought of those who have hurt us, or who we think have hurt us, fills us with hatred and ignites the burning passion of anger, the desire to get revenge and to make certain that others know the pain we have felt." (Diogenes Allen, p. 73) Toxic anger leads to sin, to loss of relationships, and it undermines the Kingdom of God.

Of anger J.D. Watt writes, "It's fascinating how we use the metaphor of a thermometer and temperature to talk about anger. It also points up one of the great myths about the so-called "quick tempered" among us. Temperature doesn't typically wildly fluctuate instantaneously. In the same way, a quick-tempered person does not explode in anger all of a sudden as it may seem. The truth is people we think of as "quick-tempered" already had a fever. They were already mad. A quick temper looks like a spike in a person's temperature who was already about to boil over. That's what anger is like, a low-grade fever. People who have a "quick temper" typically carry the low- grade fever of anger around with them all the time. Their temper can spike at the slightest thing. It often looks quite irrational and even foolish (i.e. folly). That's because quick tempered people usually aren't mad about what they are mad at.

So, one of the questions for those of us who wrestle with anger is, 'What am I mad about?' Is it really the person driving to slow or is it something deeper? It often takes either a good friend or a professional friend (i.e. counselor) to help us unearth the deeper issues. It can go all the way back to one's childhood, and we can literally carry it for a lifetime. The low grade fever of anger underlies much of what we call depression and anxiety. It literally makes us sick. The antidote, the remedy, to toxic anger is usually some form of forgiveness.

Depression and anxiety may require medication, but anger can only be cured by forgiveness. The truth is, usually what people are angry about isn't what they're angry about. So maybe keep that in mind the next time you are angry with someone. (*Seedbed*, January 14, 2017) Many of us never do the difficult, but necessary work, of uncovering the source of our low grade fever, of our anger. It's painful and forgiveness is hard and quite frankly being angry is just more appealing than forgiving.

Frederick Buechner writes, "Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last bite both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you." Love builds up. Anger, toxic

anger consumes. Love enlarges life. Anger diminishes it. Love liberates. Toxic anger leaves us in chains.

So, when we talk about anger, toxic anger, as an expression of disordered love we're not talking about what we might call righteous anger or righteous indignation or outrage at injustice, suffering and oppression. Anger that is derived from a concern for the well-being of our neighbor or the kind of anger Jesus expressed towards the money changers in the Temple is not disordered love, is not sin. That kind of anger is related to God's anger at our unfaithfulness, the injustices we commit, and out mistreatment of others.

Sometimes anger is a faithful response to unfairness, or injury, or injustice. That's what Paul encourages when he writes, "Be angry but do not sin." (Ephesians 4:26a) We *should* be angry about the things that make God angry. Anger at injustice is permitted. Indeed, an injustice not only prompts anger; it requires it.

When we see the poor oppressed, we should get angry. When we see parents working multiple jobs to barely make ends meet we should be angry. When we see our neighbors being objectified and treated as property for someone's gain or gratification we should be angry. When the 'other' is demeaned or insulted, we should get angry. When people act out of prejudice or bigotry we should be angry. When people lie and abuse power we should be angry. We should be angry at the things that make God angry and we should nurture righteous anger. But anger can be an occasion for sin, for seeking revenge instead of justice, for holding a grudge instead of seeking reconciliation. So, when you are angry, even when your anger is righteous, do not sin. (Verhey, p. 190). Instead let your righteous anger be an occasion for seeking justice and offering mercy.

Justice and mercy. We need full measures of both. We are called to love well, to love the way Jesus loved and Jesus never acted out of toxic anger. Jesus embodied the kind of righteous anger to which we are all called.

I was reminded of that this week at a district gathering where Mike Slaughter was the presenter. Mike is the pastor of Ginghamsburg UMC in Ohio. It's an amazing church and Mike is an incredible pastor and leader. Pointing to Jesus as the model and the catalyst for how we love well he reminded us that when Jesus came to his home town of Nazareth, he entered the synagogue and began to teach the people quoting from the prophet Isaiah.

> *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed*
> *Me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* (Isaiah 61:18-19) (Luke 4:18)

In reflecting on that passage Mike said, "If it's not good news for the poor, it's not good news." If the message we live and proclaim as followers of Jesus does not offer release to the captives, or new eyes to the blind, if it does not set the oppressed free and boldly proclaim God's favor to all people, then it's not the good news of Jesus Christ. In other words, if we aren't angry at the things that make God angry, if we are not constantly offering mercy and seeking justice then we're not being faithful to the One who did.

Be angry about the things that make God angry, but do not sin. Instead of anger providing an opening for the devil to sow division and discord and harm, our righteous anger should be an opportunity for the Kingdom of God to break in. Our righteous anger should propel us into the world with words and deeds that *are* good news for all of God's children. Our righteous anger should lead both to works of mercy, to alleviating suffering wherever we encounter it; and to works of justice, to demanding and working for a world that mirrors the Kingdom of God.

Likewise, when we do find ourselves angry with one another in a way that is not righteous Paul urges us to not "…let the sun go down on our anger…". (Ephesians 4:26b) The positive of that would, "Seek to be reconciled before the sun goes down, before the day is up."(Verhey, p. 190) Anger becomes sin when our anger is fed and allowed to grow within us to the point that we seek revenge rather than reconciliation. Evagrius urges us to follow the way of Christ in dealing with toxic anger. We should persistently work at reconciliation, resolution, and forgiveness. Of course not all situations can be resolved in such a way that love is not broken, but most of us give up much too easily. The psalmist says, "The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."(Psalm 145:8) Too often we are slow to love and abounding in steadfast anger. Dealing with toxic anger, not righteous anger, but toxic anger and loving in the way God loves, requires much prayer and humility. It demands that we humbly acknowledge the beam in our own eye before we point out the speck of dust in our neighbor's eye. It requires not listening to that little voice that says, "Christians don't argue. I'm supposed to be nice. If I don't mention it, all we be well tomorrow." You're not called to be nice. You're called to be faithful, kind to be sure, but faithful. Ignoring toxic anger is not virtue. This is not well-ordered love. Anger does not simply go away. If we love one another the way Jesus calls us to love, we will have the courage and the humility to talk with one another even if it means telling a brother or sister, in love, "I am angry with you." Our world desperately needs a community of people who are truthful with one another, who can deal openly and honestly with injury and the anger caused by that injury so that anger does not become like a cancer that destroys lives and communities, but instead, by God's grace, becomes a doorway to healing and reconciliation. We will be angry. But we cannot allow that anger to become an occasion for sin, an excuse for seeking revenge and settling the score, instead of an opportunity to love well and practice forgiveness and reconciliation.

To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in us. (CS Lewis) It doesn't mean that we act like the hurt never happened, or that real pain has not been caused, or that we have no reason to be angry and should just move on. No, loving well means that instead of our anger being like a poison, we allow the Holy Spirit to move within us and use our anger as a seed for forgiveness and healing.

Be angry, but do not sin. When you find yourself angry with your neighbor, love and forgive the way Jesus loves and forgives you. It's not easy, but it will set you free and transform your heart and your life. And Church, let's be angry at the things that make God angry. We're not called to maintain the status quo. We're called to follow Jesus, and to use our righteous anger as the motivation, the fire for us to love well, to offer mercy and seek justice, until God's Kingdom in heaven comes upon this earth. Amen.