***WHAT DO YOU DO WITH THE MAD THAT YOU FEEL?***

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Texts: Matthew 5:21-26 and Ephesians 4:25-27, 31-32

It was just a little less than three years ago when COVID hit and shut everything down for a while, including gathering for worship in this sanctuary, that I stood in this pulpit for the first time to preach a sermon with no one in the pews as we livestreamed the service. It was an odd feeling to be talking to folks who I could not see, but hoped were out there somewhere – and they were and some of you still are! My initial reaction to that experience was, “*This is how Mister Rogers must have felt every day!*” for his ministry was speaking to children he could not see, but with whom he connected as a trusted friend. In one of his songs, Fred Rogers raises the question that is the title of this sermon:

*What do you do with the mad that you feel*

*When you feel so mad you could bite,*

*When the whole wide world seems oh so wrong,*

*And nothing you do seems very right?*

It is a question for adults as well as kids. What do you do with your anger, with the mad that wells up within you from time to time? Do you vent it or cap it or bury it? What do you do with it?

In that song, and in the Gospel reading from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and in the portion of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians that we just read, there is an assumption that we ***will*** be angry from time to time. Jesus does not say, “*Don’t be angry!*” or “*Anger is sin*.” Paul puts it even more clearly and bluntly, “***Be*** *angry,” he says, “BUT do not sin*.” There is a distinction between anger and the sinful things you do with your anger. Jesus and Paul are realistic enough about human nature to know that anger does arise within us. We are created in the image of a God who is divinely angry sometimes, as Scripture well attests, but unlike God whose anger is always righteous, some of our anger is less righteous and some just plain selfish, some justifiable and some unjustifiable. Anger bubbles up from our earliest days when an infant’s angry cry is distinguishable from a cry of hunger or pain. Then come the Terrible Twos and the Tyrannical Threes with all their tantrums; and so it goes across a lifetime. So, the question is not, *Will you be angry*? You will. The question is: *What do you do with your anger?*

In her book *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters – and How to Talk about It*, Krista Tippett tells of interviewing Major John Morris, a military chaplain. She writes:

*[He] sat across from me in a radio studio in 2006 in full battle camouflage after his second tour of duty in Iraq. He described one of the most awful days of his service in Fallujah. He stood before the charred body parts of four American contractors hanging from a bridge across the Euphrates. Fury consumed him, along with a certainty that the people who did this did not deserve to live. They were animals. He would be the agent of God, the wrath of God. As that conviction seized him, he understood that he was at an abyss that would render him capable of the very actions he hated. ‘God help me and have mercy on me,’ he prayed. ‘Save me from becoming a debased, immoral human being, and save my soldiers as well.’ Prayers like this,* (writes Tippett*) theology like this, belong in our common life.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

What that chaplain identified in his experience was the tipping point that Paul speaks of – be angry, but do not sin. There was good reason for the chaplain to be angry at what happened to those men, righteously furious, and the temptation to vent that anger in a sinful way – dehumanizing those he held accountable – was great. But somehow, he managed to control that anger and understand that such unrestrained anger had led to the horrific suffering he saw around him, including the deaths of those four Americans. As we have seen from far too many images of war, including the current war in Ukraine, anger vented in sinful ways can have horrific consequences!

Thankfully, most of us do not have to deal with such grim realities in our day to day lives, but the temptations are no less real to vent anger in unhealthy or sinful ways. Restraining impulses to lash out in an angry moment at home or at work, in the heat of a game or in a text exchange, is important in remaining faithful to our call as disciples – and can have real world consequences as well! In my work in the prison in law school, I saw too many young men who were there because they could not exercise such self-control; they lashed out in a moment of anger and someone ended up severely injured or dead, and the next years of their lives would be spent ruing the choice they made in that moment. Be angry, but do not sin, might have saved them a lot of heartache! “*If you are patient in one moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow*,” says the Chinese proverb. But it is not just flashes of anger in the moment that Paul and Jesus warn of; it is also the anger that simmers inside us and eats us up from within.

Will Willimon suggests that even worse than anger enacted is “*Anger nursed, turned inward, fed, and nurtured.*”[[2]](#endnote-2) It is that kind of anger of which Jesus and Paul are speaking, anger that is held over time – be it hours or days – anger carried like a gnawing heartburn that does indeed burn your heart. It travels with you, consciously or unconsciously; it is there when you awake and go to work or school; it comes home with you and is dragged into worship and into bed at night. “*Do not let the sun go down on your anger*,” writes Paul. Or as Phyllis Diller says more matter-of-factly*: “Never go to bed mad. Stay up and fight*.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

What are we supposed to do with that kind of simmering anger? Deal with it! says the Lord. Jesus urges us to seek reconciliation with those with whom we are angry. As Abraham Lincoln whose birthday we celebrate this day once said: “*I do not like that man. I must get to know him better*.” That is no guarantee that you will like him better, but perhaps you will gain some understanding that eases the anger and results in reconciliation. Paul suggests practicing kindness and forgiveness.

*Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another,* *tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*

The antidote to anger is kindness and forgiveness rooted in the kindness and forgiveness that God showers upon us. Anger within us wrestles with both faithful and unfaithful responses; often the faithful response is harder to choose and less satisfying in the moment while the unfaithful response offers self-righteous satisfaction that is too often fleeting, especially when measured against God’s expectations ***for*** us and God’s actions ***toward*** us.

God expects us to be angry, but God also expects us to deal with our anger in faithful ways without sinning, to deal with our anger without burying it where it can fester, to deal with our anger by living into the example Christ offered us. Jesus was angry from time to time – with the Pharisees, with disciples – but he did not let that anger consume him or provoke him to an unfaithful response. He held people accountable, but he did so faithfully. He was angry, but he did not sin. And that is what he calls us to do. On that journey God offers to us a patient ear to hear our gripes and laments and anger, not in order to fan the flames that burn within us, but in the hope that in giving voice to it, we may let some of it go, keep it from consuming us, regain some perspective, and find a more constructive path to follow. Perhaps after venting our anger to God, we might then be able to pray with the saints who have gone before us:

*O Lord, implant in me a holy fear of the wrong kind of anger, which ministers to my own sense of self-importance, or is simply an indulgence of my own frustration. Forgive me, Lord, for all such occasions. And grant that I may not, for one moment, admit willingly into my soul any thought contrary to thy love*.[[4]](#endnote-4)

May that indeed be our prayer, and then perhaps, our amens might become AAAAHMENS! Amen

1. Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters – and How to Talk about It*, Penguin Books: 2007, p.170 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. William H. Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the 7 Deadly Sins*, Abingdon Press:2013, p.67 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Phyllis Diller quoted by William H. Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the 7 Deadly Sins*, Abingdon Press:2013, p.69 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A composite of prayers of Ruth Etcthells and Edward Bouverie Pusey, *The Coplete Book of Christian Prayer*, Continuum:1997, p.230 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)