

## Growing in Contentment

September 6, 2020 Saint Mark PC

During our Deacon's Circle meeting last Sunday the conversation moved toward the many crises we are facing today in our lives. One of the members asked a question which really stuck with me - paraphrasing, she said, "I am so angry at what is going on, how do I deal with all of that anger?"

In that moment, I wished I had a helpful pastoral answer to that question, but I didn't have anything too insightful to say. Maybe it was because I identified so much with the question.

And so to begin our Fall series on aspects of spiritual growth, the first topic that is on my mind is that question.

It is hard to avoid being aware of the national mood, and if I was to sum it up in one word, it would be "anger". Those who care about justice and equality, there's something new every day. Anger at the way immigrants are treated, anger at continuing violence against unarmed people of color, anger at the behavior of certain of our leaders. Some feel anger at the media, though I am not one of those who feel that way.

Anger at the lack of civility in our discourse.

I imagine the last thing you want to hear is another explanation of why everyone is so angry, or about what are they angry. It just seems to be where so many people are in this current environment. IF we are not careful, it could lead to actual acts of violence - like we actually have seen in the past few weeks.

Even before 2020, many social scientists have been warning that we live in an increasingly angry society - we can probably see that in the daily activities we all engage in, whether its driving on the roads, or in schools or workplaces. Can you feel it, or have you experienced it in your workplace, or in your neighborhood? That sense that anger is increasing?

Now Psalm 127 is not exactly about anger, but there is so much wisdom in that when the Psalmist writes -

Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil.

The Psalmist could have just as easily wrote, eating the bread of angry toil.

Sure, you may be one of the fortunate ones who are feeling very peaceful and content already, and that is wonderful. But even so, you might know someone else who is struggling with a lack of peace or contentment.

Here's a quick self-test for you to see how you are doing:

1, Have you ever stuffed anger inside and found it coming out sideways?

2, Have you ever taken out anger at someone you are not even mad at?

I bring this up not to make everyone angry all over again, but to remind us that finding peace and contentment is absolutely a goal and a result of a rich spiritual life. And also that we in the church of Jesus Christ have a message to share with a broken and

fearful world which is critical for our world to hear and embrace.

There is wisdom in our scriptures about dealing with anger in an appropriate way, and a way which allows us to be a witness, and set an example for others.

A woman named Leslie Charles wrote a serious book about this with a lighthearted title - she calls it "Why is everyone so Cranky?" Leslie points out some realities that I have been thinking about in this fall series - that we in 2020 were under more stress than we have previously experienced even before the pandemic hit. She says stress is actually accelerating - because the rate to change in our culture is accelerating. We are overloaded by information. We now find we are overloaded by disinformation as well. Because of technology, we have less privacy than before. We are available 24/7 with text, email and this contributes to exhaustion, burn out and a lack of contentment in our lives.

I believe God desires peace and a sense of contentment for us. And the good news is that the Bible offers some pretty good advice in dealing with anger, and much of it is found in Paul's writings in the New Testament. Paul offers 3 ways to increase our contentment:

FIRST - The emotion of anger in and of itself is not bad! Ephesians 4:26 says Be Angry! But do not sin!

A fair way to interpret that is that anger by itself does not have to lead to bad behavior. Anger is more like a flashing yellow light that says "caution ahead". It is a clue that something obviously is not right, or maybe someone else's situation is causing anger. But a closer look reveals that the world would be a lesser

place if there was no room for anger - it is a very human emotion.

We know for example that Jesus expressed anger in the gospels, mostly at the Scribes and the Pharisees. He felt their rigid adherence to the law kept them from being loving people. He famously overturned the tables of the sellers in the temple, he was angry with them. He said God's house is a house of prayer not a den of thieves, and it was a righteous anger.

One commentator put it plainly: It was not a selfish anger, but a selfless anger.

History has many more examples where in working towards love and justice, anger is helpful and positive.

Maybe you remember the story of Charles Finney, a pastor in Ohio during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He became very angry about the existence of slavery in the US, and so he decided to preach about it, talk about it and work for justice. That was not a popular thing to do at that time, but he had a kind of righteous anger in him.

IN his church in Ohio he paid a price for insisting that African Americans did not have to sit separat4ly in the church and could be full participants in the community of faith.

But that righteous anger contributed to getting rid of the institution of slavery in the US. So anger can be a healthy thing and bring justice and righteousness to a situation

So the New Testament's advice to us if we might be afraid of what lies ahead for issues of justice and equality and fairness, is to remind us that anger which

is a selfless anger - looking out for the least and lost and last can be a healthy anger, and may be absolutely necessary

But the other side of that is:

SECOND - Anger that is selfish and anger that is stored up over time is dangerous and destructive.

Again, Ephesians says "Be angry BUT do not sin"

Give no opportunity for evil. Because destructive anger can sidetrack our best efforts, and our ministry.

If you are protesting an injustice and decide to destroy property out of anger, you may be working counter to your goals.

Be angry but do not sin.

The Greek word for anger in the NT that is stored up inside is the word Thumos. Ironically it is the same word in Greek for a volcanic eruption. If you carry that anger around for a day or a month or a year, when it finally comes out it is an explosion.

Maybe that describes what we are seeing with a small number of people.

Some psychologists call this a pack we wear on our back and every time we become angry and don't properly deal with it, or bring it to God in prayer or perhaps a counselor, we just stick it in this backpack and it starts to get heavy. Later somebody says the wrong thing, or does the wrong thing and we take the pack and dump it upside down on that person all out of proportion to their mistake. All that anger, boom Thumos!

It can hurt people. It can derail movements. It can alter relationships. It is why MLK constantly insisted on non-violent protests.

And personally what's more, anger stuffed inside can make us sad and lead to depression.

So anger that is selfish and stored up is dangerous and destructive.

So what to do. It's no surprise that Paul's answer is, if you want to grow in contentment, put your anger under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. If you believe that God loves you and wants you to be whole in body and spirit, sometimes that means being honest with God.

The Psalms are a place to go to describe expressing every kind of human emotion to God. If you are feeling angry, read Psalm 22 - the writer of this Psalm is angry at life, and his enemies and even if you can imagine - angry at God. The Psalmist gets this out in the open, tells God about it, and the doorway between God and that person is now open.

The other resources beside the Biblical writings is prayer. When you are angry at life or at yourself, or at God if you sit back and ask the Holy Spirit what is going on in my life, you may get some insight into an area of life where some growth or some caution is needed.

And sometimes an experience of anger shared with God in prayer can lead to great spiritual growth and maturity. This is what our concept of grace leads us to believe.

My wife Caroline used to do a Children's sermon, where she brought in a magic sketch pad into the church, and had the kids sit around and bring up things which mad

them mad or upset. There were a lot of them. They were mad and their brother or sister, their teacher, their mom or dad and so on. They filled up the pad pretty quickly.

And then she took that slate which has the little wax paper on it and said, "when you give these things to God, this is what happens, and she went "woosh", pulled that paper and they were gone.

We know its not that easy, but we know this: We were never meant to carry all these things we have on our slates. God wants us to grow, not in anger but in peace of mind, in contentment.

As people of faith, give it to God. No, its not exactly a magic slate, but there is grace, there is forgiveness. God offers a new beginning. God can set us free from debilitating anger.

I love the story of Nelson Mandela - you remember - in prison for 27 years in South Africa. When he got out, he was so popular, it was inevitable he would become President of South Africa, a bizarre turnaround really.

So a reporter asked him to reflect on all the anger and all the bitterness he had around 27 years of his life being imprisoned.

Mandela was quoted as saying: "Oh if I had let anger and resentment control me, then my enemies would have won. I had a choice to make - I could have easily been bitter, but I have chosen the higher ground of forgiveness and love - therefore God and I have won. I am free to leave, to live to love."

Are we free like that? Paul says put your anger under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and the peace of God

which passes all understanding will guard your hearts  
and minds in Christ Jesus.

May it be so. Amen.