

Familiarity breeds contempt

Luke 4:20-30

January 31, 2016

I can talk about fear, because I have been afraid. I can talk about doubt, because I have doubted. I can talk about depression, because I have been depressed and know what it feels like from the inside. I understand depression. And even though I have not known despair, I can talk about despair because I think I understand it. I can imagine what it feels like. Even though I have not been there, I have seen it from a distance.

But I hesitate to talk about anger, because I don't understand anger. Anger scares me. Other people's anger scares me. My own anger scares me. I do a very good job, most of the time, of suppressing my anger. Or maybe I should say, denying my anger! I rarely get angry.

But when a flush of anger -- and it is a flush! a tingling surge of heat that flashes over my face and throughout my body -- when a flush of anger comes over me and I clench my teeth and my fists and I want to ... It scares me. Something I didn't even know was there has suddenly taken over my body and threatens to take over my will, threatens to make me say something I don't want to say, to do something I don't want to do.

Anger is a shadow, a dark and threatening cloud that overshadows my spirit. Like depression, anger is a shadow, not a sin, but like depression, it may lead to sin. Anger itself is an emotion, an emotion I have. It is mine. It comes to me. I experience it. It is there.

But what matters about anger is not so much the anger itself as two other things, the answers to two questions. What will I do with the anger? And where did it come from?

What will I do with my anger? That's where the question of sin comes in. Will I unleash my anger in some kind of careless and destructive way or will I find a way to acknowledge it and express it in a helpful and constructive way?

And even more importantly for understanding and managing anger: where did it come from? It is there, in that place, the birthplace of my anger, the birthplace of the shadow, that God's light needs to shine.

The Nazareth congregation was angry, infuriated. What did they do with it? They were going to kill him! They intended to throw him over the edge of a cliff. What were they thinking? Or maybe that's it. Maybe they weren't thinking, because anger's shadow had so clouded their judgment.

Where did their anger come from? Anger comes from a dislocation between what we want and what we get, between what we expect and what actually happens, between the world as it is supposed to be and the world as it is.

In that way, anger is very much like depression, a response to that sense of dislocation, to the gap, the contradiction, between things as they are and things as you want them to be or as they could be or as they should be. But while depression responds by withdrawing, anger responds by attacking, and while depression often blames itself for the dislocation, anger blames something or someone else. But even though they usually move in opposite directions, depression and anger are still closely related. Suppressed anger easily leads to depression and unmanaged depression can lead to outbursts of anger.

So where did their anger come from? What sort of dislocation were they experiencing?

Jesus had come home. The hometown boy, now all grown up, came home and went on the Sabbath to the synagogue. He joined the congregation and they asked him to read and he read from the gospel, the gospel of Isaiah, and then he said, "Today." Today, right here, right now, this gospel is coming true.

Whoa! That took them by surprise. They didn't see that coming. But it was powerful, it was beautiful, and there rose a buzz among the people, a buzz of admiration for this hometown boy. Surprise and admiration. Admiration because he's our boy! And surprise because he's our boy.

And then Jesus made them mad. He made them mad because he called himself a prophet and told them no prophet is welcomed in his own hometown. And he told them more. He told them about Elijah and Elisha, prophets who helped and healed, not people of Israel, but foreigners, a Canaanite woman and a Syrian man. Prophets do come to announce good news to the poor, to set the oppressed free, to heal the blind, but the poor and the oppressed and the blind to whom God sends them are often outsiders -- people in Sidon or Syria or Nicaragua or Cambodia or Haiti. But Jesus, shouldn't you be taking care of your own people first?

Was Jesus antagonizing them or just telling the truth? They were not ready to listen to Jesus, not ready to believe that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, not ready to receive humbly and gratefully what God had to offer them through him, not ready to be healed by him, not ready to be saved by him, not ready to turn their lives around because of him, because, after all, he was just Joseph's son. Familiarity breeds contempt.

Who does he think he is anyway lecturing us about God? How dare he put down his own people? What right does he have to tell us what we are thinking? And so they were infuriated, even if they weren't exactly sure why. Were they angry because he made himself out to be God's anointed prophet? Or angry because he wasn't going to "perform" for them, because he wasn't going to do what they wanted, because he wasn't going to be their boy?

They grabbed him and hauled him out of town and took him to the edge of the cliff where they fully intended to hurl him to his death. "But he walked straight through them all, and went away."

He simply walked away. How? Luke offers no explanation. Was it a miracle? God protecting his chosen servant? Or when it finally came to the point of it, did they hesitate? Did they look at themselves and ask, "What are we doing?" Did God's light shine in the darkness of their spirits just enough to see through the shadow of their anger, to see their anger for what it was?

Anger is an emotion, but it is not uncontrollable. Anger, like other emotions, can be trained, educated, disciplined, refined, even transformed. Emotion is shaped and managed and directed by character, by the beliefs and values that define the core of who we are. And emotion may re-shaped and guided and transformed by the light of God shining into our minds and hearts. Anger will not be eliminated from our lives, but it can serve a better purpose.

I asked you before, what makes you angry? Not getting your way? Petty insults? A personal attack? Or do unfairness, injustice, cruelty, poverty, suffering, pain make you angry? When God's light shines on the sources of our anger, it is these greater dislocations, the hurts that others suffer, not our own, that make us burn, and anger begins to look very much like love.