

*Be Angry? The Freedoms and Limits of Anger*

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 9, 2009

Jill R. Russell

Texts: 2 Samuel 18.5-9, 15, 31-33,  
Psalm 130,  
Ephesians 4.25-5.2,  
John 6.35, 41-54

If you were raised in a Christian home...let me be more specific...if you were raised in a *reformed* Christian home in the mid-west, then you know as well as I know that good Christian boys and girls do not get angry. (I don't care what *The Feelings Book* says.)<sup>1</sup> What were some of us taught in that setting? We received messages like: "Feeling anger is a sin....anger is ugly.... worst of all, anger is not nice!"

Now of course it is not possible to be human and avoid anger altogether, so what many of us were taught was how to pretend that we are not angry even when we are steaming mad inside. We saw some trusted adult show us how: take a deep breath, paste a smile on your face, and pretend like it never happened. There are some pretty significant costs for denying, suppressing, and pretending that anger doesn't exist. For those of us raised in the anger=sin cultural milieu, Ephesians 4:26 is a bit of a shocking statement: "Be angry but do not sin." Be angry? I want to be clear; this isn't a command to be angry. Anger is not held up as some ideal state that we should strive toward. It's simply an acknowledgement that anger happens. It is part of being human and it does not go away simply because you are a person of faith.

In fact, this is an important observation for this whole passage of Ephesians 4. This is not list of behaviors to work toward in order to become a Christian. I love the image of one commentator: the works described in

---

<sup>1</sup> At the children's sermon, I read the children some portions of *The Feelings Book* by Todd Parr and we talked about the fact that feelings are not good or bad. They just are. What matters, and what God expects from us, is that we learn how to deal with our feelings in ways that do not hurt other people.

Ephesians here are not “merit badges<sup>2</sup>” to be earned. The passage just before makes clear that when we are “in Christ” we are baptized and claimed as ones who belong to God. When we are “in Christ” there is this transformation; this renewal of the spirit of our minds that **moves us away** from our former way of life, our old self, and the ways of the world. At the same time the renewal of our minds **moves us toward** the ways of God so that we can be clothed with a new self to be created according to the likeness of God (that’s how our passage ended last week).<sup>3</sup> What’s described in our passage for today is this alternate way of life. It’s a description of what it looks like to be renewed in the spirit of your mind. It’s something that begins with the work of the Holy Spirit in us creating a sense of longing for a better way of living together and then giving some very concrete examples of what that might look like. It begins (as Mary VanAndel spoke about last week) with speaking the truth, and that includes being honest about our anger when it comes.

I want to turn for a moment toward the passage from 2 Samuel. We ended last week with the prophet Nathan confronting David over his involvement in the Bathsheba and Uriah scandal.<sup>4</sup> Nathan warned David that because of this violence that he brought into his home the sword would never leave his household.<sup>5</sup> I didn’t hear that as a curse so much (“a pox on both your houses!”) as a description of what happens when violence and violation are brought into a home. It creates a cycle of abuse that is hard to break.

We come to this story today where one of David’s sons, Absalom, has raised up an army in opposition of David. It begs the question of how this family could disintegrate so completely that it would come to a battle of this magnitude of son against father. It’s a long story. If you think the Uriah and Bathsheba cycle is rather R rated material for Sunday morning worship, the story that launches Absalom against his father is even more shocking and upsetting.<sup>6</sup> Absalom’s sister, Tamar, is raped by their brother

---

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, G. Porter Taylor, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) , 328.

<sup>3</sup> See Ephesians 4.22-24.

<sup>4</sup> See the story in 2 Samuel 11 and 12.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Samuel 12.10.

<sup>6</sup> This part of the story begins in 2 Samuel 13.

Amnon. Part of what is so offensive is that no one does anything about it after she is violated in this way. The text tells us that David gets angry but he doesn't **do** anything about it.<sup>7</sup> No one holds Amnon accountable. No one restores Tamar, who is left to live out her days as a desolate woman in the house of her brother Absalom.<sup>8</sup> We don't know what David does with his anger but Absalom is enraged with his father and his brother and he sits on it for two years until it explodes in a violent plot that leads to Amnon's death.<sup>9</sup> David is enraged that Absalom has killed his first born son Amnon and sits on his anger refusing to speak to Absalom for two years.<sup>10</sup> Finally, David comes to the place where he wants to be restored to his son Absalom...and it is too late.

I hope to God that none of us have to live with this level of drama and dysfunction in our homes. But statistics bear out the truth given witness to here: sexual abuse and domestic violence happens even in families of faith. A surprising number of us in this room have faced some of these realities in our lives. The relative silence of the church on these matters doesn't help. The fact that we don't read the story of Tamar and Amnon or talk about how these cycles of violence occur or even more importantly how healing can break those cycles doesn't serve the body of Christ. If a surprising number of people present here today have been touched in some way by the kind of terror and violence that tore through David's family, most all of us at one time or another have dealt with the very destructive nature of unresolved and unexpressed anger even if in slightly more subtle ways.

What the writer of Ephesians envisions is that we deal directly and honestly face to face with our anger the moment that it arises before the sun sets. That doesn't need to become a literal prescription. Sometimes we need time to sort through our feelings. But it is a helpful image to drive home a sense of urgency to take responsibility to deal with our anger. If we

---

<sup>7</sup> 2 Samuel 13.21.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Samuel 13.20.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Samuel 13.23-29.

<sup>10</sup> The story is actually more complicated than this but the net result is the same. Absalom is brought back to Jerusalem after David mourns for Amnon but is not invited into the King's presence for 2 full years. See 2 Samuel 14.28.

don't it can turn into bitterness which over time can lead to that whole list in vs. 31 that becomes the kind of interlocking and self perpetuating destruction we see unraveling in David's household.

I suspect it is the work of the God's Spirit that I finally picked up a book that has been on my nightstand since last October. I borrowed Pastor Gordon's copy of *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*<sup>11</sup> just after I arrived here and only started reading it a few weeks ago. I've been working through the book slowly really trying to practice each of the steps within it. As I've been doing it, the language of Ephesians 4 rings true to me. This work is a process of renewing your mind because it is so counter-intuitive to how so many of us were raised and how the world around us operates. The core of the philosophy is to take responsibility for what you feel and communicate in ways that create connection and inspire compassion. One of the best insights from the book is that your feelings might be **triggered** by someone else but they are not **caused** by someone else. That alone is worth the price of admission in my book.

Marshall Rosenberg developed his philosophy of non-violent communication when he began pondering two very simple questions: "What happens to disconnect us from our compassionate nature (the one described at the end of our passage from Ephesians today...being kind and tender-hearted and forgiving)? And conversely, what allows some people to stay connected to their compassionate nature even under the most trying circumstances?"<sup>12</sup> Why is it easier to simply cut off from people when we are angry with them (as Absalom and David each did at different points in their relationship) than it is to deal directly with our anger and with the people or situation that have triggered those reactions in us? It's a great question and I don't think the answers are simple.

When I say it is the work of the Holy Spirit that I picked up this book at the same time we are working through the book of Ephesians what I mean is that it has come at a really good time in my own life. I'm a pretty laid back

---

<sup>11</sup> Rosenberg, Marshall B. *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encinitas, CA: Puddle Dancer Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Rosenberg, pg. 1.

person. I don't get angry very easily. All of a sudden I've had three or four opportunities in the last two weeks to practice this whole call in Ephesians to "be angry but do not sin."<sup>13</sup> I don't know why but I have. And we'll just leave it at that.

What it has done is raised my awareness of how important this work is for us as a community, as families, in our marriages and partnerships, in our friendships, in school, at work. Things said in a momentary flash of anger and even more the things that unfold as a result of years of bitterness and unexpressed anger...well it can lead to the kind of grief and regret that overwhelmed David's soul at the end of our passage today.<sup>14</sup>

It's a pretty high calling in front of us today. The passage from Ephesians ends with the call to be imitators of God - to live in love.

I am grateful for the Psalm we have today<sup>15</sup> which gives us permission and a model for how we can express in the presence of God the kinds of painful and difficult feelings we have been addressing today.

To live in love, to be imitators of **God**: it is indeed a high calling and it is hard, hard work.

Thank God we don't do it alone.

Amen.

---

<sup>13</sup> Coming out of worship the personnel chair inquired if she should be worried about this anger. I assured her she did not. They were not big incidents just little moments to put in practice what I had been learning about non violent communication.

<sup>14</sup> See 2 Samuel 18.33.

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 130.