

The Type of Anger That Helps

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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So, how many of you saw the trailer for the New Mister Rogers movie with Tom Hanks as the lead? Pretty awesome, huh? I grew up with Mister Rogers, and to me he is a saint, and it's hard to disagree when you see that old clip of him defending the value of public television to a congressional hearing and he showcases his song, "what do you do with the mad that you feel?" to the congressman. Of course, public television was even in 1969 on the chopping block of our budget, but at the end of his 6 minute testimony, the senator awards public television 20 million dollar – 20 million 1969! Dollars. Very cool thing to watch, and I think significant that he chose that song to showcase – anger. Anger is a dangerous thing. People either tame their anger or it comes to consume them. How funny though that Mister Rogers describes his call to putting together children's programming as being derived from anger. He describes his parents getting a television set turning it on, and seeing people getting pies thrown in their face. This made him angry. He was angry at the physical depictions of violence, angry that kids would be exposed to it, and angry at how people talked to and treated children. He was angry, but he turned that anger into a calling. One would not call him an angry man, but he was someone who used his anger in a way that helped him contribute positively to the world. I wonder if that can't be a bit of a touchstone for how we ought to think about anger.

Scripture seems pretty clear, and life experience is also pretty easy to read that anger is not a great thing to have as one of your primary emotions. If you are angry all the time, that's not a good thing, and we ought to be afraid of people who are outwardly displaying anger all the time. I have known my fair share of clergy and activists who were angry for the right reasons but let that anger consume them. They were not masters of their anger as we are taught that we must be by our ancient wisdom. They used their anger on their enemies but it turned right back around and gave them burnout, depression, divorce, alcoholism, and plenty of other experiences we would rather avoid. Anger is scary, and yet the temptation to use it as a tool to do some good in the world is always present. My question is, should the spiritual person even try? Or is it one of those traps that we fall into in our human evolution. Righteous anger feels good, but is it worth it? Can it be controlled, or is it a passion that the Jedi were right to put away completely in Star Wars. Of course, don't miss the lesson of Star Wars, putting away all their passions made the Jedi weak in other ways – they lacked empathy.

So, let's take a look at our passage from John. This is a scene that appears in all the Gospels, so scholars tell us that in all likelihood it happened. Jesus in some manner disrupted symbolically temple worship for a day. In all likelihood, this is what caused people to take notice and decide to end his life – in fact in some of the Gospels, it causes the religious leaders to immediately gather and declare that it is better for one man to die than an entire people. Jesus has to go. I chose John for this reading, not because it's the

best historical source, but because Jesus has a whip in it, and there is not a better display of anger than whipping people out of a house of worship. In art, it is the passage from John that is depicted all over the hallowed church halls of Europe and the United States – Jesus, iconic whip in hand, angry at injustice. And it has been the go-to for people who want to permissively say that anger is permitted for Christians. Jesus got angry, he whipped people or at least cracked it a couple of times, and so anger isn't a bad thing. This, I think is a bad interpretation. Jesus did a symbolic prophetic action, but nevertheless it's a good lesson that whatever we want to find in scripture we will find if we look hard enough. But yes, Jesus was angry.

In our reading from a Theravada Buddhist text this morning we also find a discussion of dosa. And dosa is not directly analogous to anger, but hey, it's close enough for this discussion. Now, what you need to notice is that it's compared to urine mixed with poison. You might think that this is a doubly bad judgment, but not so. In ancient India urine was also used as a medicine. And so it can be used to heal, but it seems like dosa inevitably becomes poison if it is not checked. In other words, we ought to be careful with it. Most medicine after all is just poison in smaller doses. Too much of it, and it crosses the line to poison.

And so, we have anger used positively, but perhaps by someone that we can't approach their righteousness, and a warning that anger may appear medicinal, but quickly crosses over to poison. So, what ought the spiritual person to do with anger?

The category of the spiritual person is most important here I think. Most people ought to avoid anger, because it is poison, at the end of the day, but people who are centered enough, in tune enough with their emotions, and who are up to being self-reflective and asking people they trust to hold them accountable can use anger without being burnt by it. There is a difference in hot anger and cold anger. Hot anger is, for me, right after something happens. Sometimes something will happen right before I preach that outrages the conscience and that demands addressing from the pulpit. I do that, but very hesitantly on the week of, because hot anger comes back on the wielder. But cold anger, the sort of anger about injustice that leads to a sense of calling, that leads to broader discernment about how we can be a part of solutions, that is in community, now that can be useful. It is often true that I preach from cold anger, because it can be useful.

Now this is anger at institutions. I want to state very clearly that anger at individuals almost never produces the healing that we desire. There are times when we will be angry, there are times when we won't be able to forgive. There is damage that other human beings in this world can do that is massive, but take care with that anger. It will eventually consume.

So, if I may tell you what I'm angry about this morning, it is the report that came out of an American citizen detained for 26 days who didn't shower and lost 23 lbs. Most of the news coverage centered around the fact that this was an American, and that made me angry. The fact is that this is what our camps on the border are doing to people day in and day out. Starvation, lack of human dignity, and yes it happened in this case to one of

us, but it ought to anger us that it happens to human beings at all. Such is the state of public discourse that it is not outrage that a beloved of God would have this done to them, but that it is an American. This is such weak moral reasoning that we ought to be ashamed, and angry. Yes, angry. So, what should we do about it? We have got to change that conversation. If you are having these conversations, remind people that this is not about nationality, but this is about a moral outrage of the greatest proportions. Talk about it, write to your congressperson, be outraged, pray about it, be angry with God about it, if you need to.

That's what I'm angry about this morning. But it's leading me to a clearer distillation of how impoverished our conversation is, and how dangerous we are right now in this country. Maybe it makes you freshly angry in a useful way. Being angry at the president won't help, but being angry in a way that helps means shifting conversations to your ethical and spiritual values. I know we're up for it. Have those tough conversations when you leave this building or this sermon is for nothing.

So, be angry, but only if you can handle it, and may that anger lead you to a greater sense of purpose. Otherwise, it is just urine mixed with poison.

Blessed Be.