

## **Be Angry But Do Not Sin**

**Ephesians 4:25, (John 6:35b, 41-51) Ute**

*Molitor, First Congregational Church, Camden, UCC, August 11, 2024*

### **Ephesians 4:25-5:2:**

*So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather, let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. 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. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave up life for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

### **John 6:35b, 41-51:**

*Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. Then the religious authorities began to complain about Jesus for saying, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me, and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from God comes to me. Not that anyone has seen God except the one who is from God; that one has seen God. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

The other morning I had just prepared a cup of black tea and was really looking forward to the flavor and wake up kick it would provide. The next thing I knew I watched myself pouring my granola out of the jar and right into my tea. While I am known for some odd food combining and eating habits, I assure you that pouring granola into my tea is not one of them. I paused and in short order started to laugh which was a big relief because there could have been some unhappy emotional alternatives. Why do mishaps like this happen while our mental capacities are at least theoretically quite intact?

I am aware that I was distracted and preoccupied. It's reassuring that there is a very good chance that I am not the only person who has experienced such moments. In fact, let's take a moment and either just remember such an incident quietly or, if you are up for it, turn to your neighbor and share what you did. I'm sure there are some creative stories out there. Pause and let people share...There are many reasons why we might get preoccupied or distracted. I think when that granola landed in my tea, I was trying to puzzle through the many layers of communication and planning related to church.

We might be distracted because we are madly in love or otherwise super self-conscious about something or someone. I once heard a story about a woman who went to an ice cream store in a town where the late actor Paul Newman and his wife often spent summers. She walked in excited to get her ice cream and got quite distracted when she realized that Paul Newman was sitting at a table with a newspaper, cup of coffee and a donut. She was a big fan of his and quite taken by his blue eyes which were still shining bright in his later years. She nodded her head toward him and then somehow managed to order her much desired ice cream cone. She paid and left. When she got to her car, she realized that she didn't have her ice cream. So she went back inside and asked at the counter if she had somehow left it there. That is when Paul Newman spoke up and said, "You put it in your purse."<sup>1</sup>

On a more serious note, we may be worried for our child who is being bullied or getting hooked on video games in unhealthy ways. We may be preoccupied by a situation at work or a political development in the country or within relationships that are important to us. It's easy to let our minds and hearts get hijacked to the point that our ability to perceive and be present to the people and the world around us contracts. Instead of being able to hold a wide view and keep the apertures of perception open, the world shrinks. With this shrinking and contracting, our capacity to respond creatively and compassionately is often diminished. We are all vulnerable to this happening.

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<sup>1</sup> Mindfulness Meditation teacher and psychologist, Tara Brach, tells this story in one of her talks.

This tends to be particularly true when we feel hurt, betrayed, and find ourselves in the grip of anger. This is not a new human experience. It's as ancient as the human species. I love that the letters of the early church often give us a glimpse into how early Christians dealt with difficult emotions. In the Letter to the Ephesians, we read this admonition: *"Be angry but do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil."* Let's begin by noticing that anger is accepted here as a normal human emotion which we should not minimize or deny. Just because we are people of faith does not mean that we are expected to ignore what we are actually feeling. Sometimes, we may be convinced that we should be spiritually above our most basic emotions and seek refuge in false piety. That is called a "spiritual bypass" and only makes dealing with a situation harder because the emotion tends to go underground and act out in ways we may not even be conscious of. Anger is real and human. We need to be mindful of its effects on us and how we respond to experiencing the anger and the people and contexts in which these feelings arise.

Healthy anger can be a helpful and life-giving signal to us that something is not ok and that it is ok to feel that way. Anger can help us speak up when boundaries have been crossed, we feel misrepresented or undermined, when an injustice occurs, or another destructive behavior is witnessed or experienced directly. Anger can be a pathway to saying a "sacred no," hopefully expressed with constructive care. Saying that "no" can be a protection against internalizing the anger and turning to self-blame when we have indeed been wronged by something or someone outside of us.

Anger can also explode into destructive behavior. When Paul says, "don't make room for the devil," I think he is referring to behavior which only creates more chaos and upset. The word "devil" is derived from the Greek "diabolos" which means the one who throws things into or across to throw someone or something for a loop. That's when insults are hurled, assumptions are made without checking whether they are actually true, or when we recruit other people to do our bidding. That's when the plates or cups go flying in the kitchen after your spouse or child says or does something which "makes you mad." It's when, as we read in the Letter to the

Ephesians, “evil talk comes out of our mouths” instead of “what is useful for building up.” Paul reminds us that we also “make room for the devil” when we turn to slander, spreading falsehoods about others, or when we get bitter and plot revenge in our sense of self-righteous indignation. As Gandhi reminded the world, “An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.” We see the effects of not heeding this wisdom wreak havoc around the world. All these are examples of being angry and sinning which means to miss the mark of how God would like us to live.

Paul also says that when we “miss the mark” in such ways of dealing with our anger, we are “grieving the Holy Spirit of God.” Ouch! When I hear these words, I imagine the Holy Spirit doing this: (Ute moving her hands across her face, dislodging her glasses, sighing deeply). I imagine we would all like to connect with the Holy Spirit’s life-giving ways within us rather than create consternation. Thankfully, the Holy Spirit of God does not abandon us. Paul reminds us that we have alternatives. I think embracing those can take practice and time. I suspect that when Paul writes, “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger,” he is not assuming that we always have everything sorted out, had all the right conversations and found a way to move forward, by the end of the same day.

Maybe that does happen sometimes when we address a hurt of misunderstanding right away and all involved can respond wisely and with humility. Sometimes we need more time and that is ok as well. Hopefully, by the end of the day when anger emerges, there can be some inroad to softening and uncurling from the contraction of hurt and anger, even if in seemingly smaller ways. It may be the willingness to take time and allow yourself to feel how this anger expresses itself in your own body, to breathe into it, bow to it and see if you can be with it. It might just start to loosen its grip and make other things possible the next day. If it triggers you too much, then it is also wise to let go of contacting that in your body and instead connect with a part of you in your body where you feel calm or grounded. That might just be your pinky toe! It’s a reminder that we can have more than one emotion or sensation and need not be overidentified with it.

Depending on the quality of your relationship with someone, “not letting the sun go down on your anger” might look like saying to your spouse, child, friend, or congregational member: “I feel angry right now, and I care about you and your experience. I need some time to get in touch with what I am feeling and thinking and hope we can find a way to talk about this soon.” This way, you are already acknowledging that this experience and your feelings toward someone are not as one-dimensional as they may be feeling when the heat of anger is the hottest. If you are not yet ready to engage the other, perhaps you can say a prayer like: “God, I feel angry. Please help me to tend to it in a healthy way for myself and others involved.” Such a prayer might even delight the Holy Spirit. It may be a first step of saying a “sacred yes” of wanting to find a way forward that will not cause further harm, whether the other is able to ever walk the path forward with us or not.

Of course, we may find ourselves in a situation where we are not the only one who feels angry or has been hurt. We may have more than the usual work to do in understanding the perspective of the other. All this requires special care. Next Sunday, I will delve a bit more deeply into what we are proposing as our own process of what we aspire to do when our *Covenant of Right Relations* has been breached. We drafted and adopted this Covenant as part of our visioning process and because the UCC is urging all congregations to do so. We now also have the follow-up process to share. In my sermon, I will also share some additional ideas about attitudes and processes which may make difficult one on one conversations more effective. As human beings we are all learning to grow together by the grace of God. I hope you will all join me in leaning into this opportunity for the sake of all our relationships. It can be our “fragrant offering” to God, as Paul puts it in the text.

In the meantime, I encourage all of us to pay attention to our emotions and to see if we can welcome them without being hijacked by them. If anger arises, perhaps try to find some way to create a “sacred pause” before you react and say to yourself: “Hi anger, I see you and feel you. I will tend to you” and take some deep breaths. See if you can create any space to remember

that your life is bigger than this one experience and that you will find a way through it in time. Perhaps, say that prayer: “God, I feel angry. Please help me to tend to it in a healthy way for myself and others involved.”

And, folks, when that ice cream lands in our purse or the granola in our tea for one reason or another, I pray that we can have a good laugh. Let us remember that amidst our collective feelings, confusions and shenanigans, God continues to shower us with grace, nurture us with the peace of Christ’s love, and bring us together through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God.