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# “Giving Up Anger”

Matthew 5:21-24

**Lesley-Ann Hix Tommey**  
**Assistant Minister**

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*“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”*

Matthew 5:21-24

Anger makes me uncomfortable. I don't like it when someone is angry at me, I replay it over and over. And I don't like being angry, I replay that even more over and over. Anger feels careless, destructive, divisive. But, I have my fair share of stories too. In fact, my parents caught a very angry 16-year-old Lesley-Ann on our answering machine once. I don't even remember why I was calling my brother that day. It wasn't important. I called, probably just to ask him something, and I knew he was home. When he didn't answer, I asked him to. And then when he still didn't answer, I yelled for him to. It escalated quickly. And I kept yelling until he did. Mom loved that message. She said it showed me being real. But I laughed half-heartedly at it. I thought my anger was justified in that moment. And I don't let go of it easily.

When I'm commuting with a stroller on the bus, and the bus driver or the passengers seem put out by me, or no

one makes space for us, or people roll their eyes at the baby load we bring with us, I hold onto it for a while. One time someone was actually complaining out loud about strollers on buses while I was right there with my stroller on the bus. I mean, come on! Then I usually complain to Julia about it when I get to church.

We all feel angry when a boundary is crossed or we feel threatened or we are hurt. When we get angry, what we really feel is vulnerable and exposed, or sad, or disrespected, or lonely, or unsafe. Our anger is a sign that something is wrong, and we need to do something about it.

So anger isn't inherently bad. We all get angry about how the rise of gun violence makes our young people feel unsafe when they go to school every day. We all get angry about people not having access to clean drinking water or people dying of hunger. Justice issues make us rightfully angry. And hopefully that anger moves us to take action.

But we have to remember that anger is like fire. For some trees, exposure to fire is the only way their seed pods will open. Fire is necessary for growth. But fire can easily burn out of control.

And anger becomes sinful when it makes us want to burn everything down. Destructive anger, no matter what's stoking that fire, turns people into bullies, abusers, killers.

If we're honest, we like being mad. Having an enemy makes us feel better. Saying mean things to a name on a screen isn't that bad because they started it. The passive aggressive sibling deserves being shut out. And of course we need to know who our neighbors voted for before we let our kids have a play date.

The MTA is an easy enemy. When we show up to work mad, it's no big deal because our commute was awful. Bikes on sidewalks deserve to be stepped in front of and told how they're wrong. And anyone who takes advantage of us—lawyers, contractors—anyone we ask, or pay, for help and they don't deliver, we deserve recourse. We're quick to find exceptions to giving up anger. Getting it out feels a lot better than letting it go.

But staying angry turns us into hateful people.

Turning to love and away from anger, is a risky choice, but it's what will heal us.

Right at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus gives a jam-packed sermon on love to a crowd gathered to listen to him. Like a good rabbi, he teaches. And everything he says sounds both like risk and relief to them. He begins his sermon without hiding anything. He gets straight to the point.

“Blessed are the poor and the hungry and the peacemakers,” he says.

He's trying to communicate who God is. And from the beginning, he's preaching something radical. Jesus makes it clear that God understands, even honors the pain that comes with being fully human. Jesus talks about the meek inheriting the earth and the oppressed being citizens of heaven. It's a little opposite of the world they're living in. But that's who God is. God is wholly different, bringing the last to the front and calling us to be healers instead of fighters.

In a world where everyone is trying to get theirs, with little regard to those around them, God asks us to pay attention to our connectedness. We need each other.

When we get angry, when we get jealous, when we hoard, it affects not just us, but other children of God too. That delusion of independence creates a culture where someone can justify getting out of his car in an intersection to punch the windshield of the car behind him.

“How you live matters to God,” Jesus is telling the crowd. “How you choose to deal with life can bring you closer to God or push you away. It’s not just what you do, it’s why and how you do it.”

Like a good rabbi, Jesus references the law.

“You know this by heart,” he tells them. “You know God is against murder and adultery and cursing.”

Killing someone is likely not something any of us have struggled with. Do not murder. It’s back there in Exodus and Deuteronomy. We all agree the Purge should never ever be a thing.

But Jesus tells them there’s actually more to it than that. In fact, the stewing anger that goes unchecked and burns out of control pushes us away from God too. Anger that turns into months, years of resentments kills our relationships. Sometimes we even pass it down through generations. Eventually, whether we are the Hatfields or the McCoy’s, the Montagues or the Capulets, the Jets or the Sharks, we don’t remember why we hate each other, we just know there’s no way we would be caught dead associating with the other.

At this point, Jesus turns up the drama. “I’m not kidding,” he says. “It’s not just about not killing. It’s not even just about checking the anger that leads to killing. It’s about continually healing your relationships. No matter what’s happened, if there’s a rift between you and another

person, you might as well not come to God because your gift won't be honest. Fix your relationship first, then you can give your whole heart. That's the gift God wants from you."

This isn't just confession or making amends. Jesus does something unexpected by telling us that whoever becomes aware of the rift—no matter who caused the problem—whoever becomes aware of the issue is responsible to initiate healing. This doesn't mean we're to reunite with our abusers. It does mean that we all need our whole hearts. And anger has an incessant way of hijacking our hearts.

Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, which began on the Lower East Side in the 1930s, said, "If each of us could just remember that we are all created in the image of God, then we would naturally want to love more."

It's easier said than done, but the antidote to anger is to practice more love. Every story from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s proves it. Whole people sharing love and respect and demanding to be seen as full human beings. Recognizing the light of God in those around us helps us practice love. Giving up anger is also about practicing awareness, mindfulness, patience, forgiveness, peace.

Stopping hate in its tracks means being in tune with our emotions from the beginning so we don't have to mirror what we're given. To keep from giving back more anger when that's what we're receiving, we have to notice when our hearts start racing or we can't make eye contact or we begin rallying our troops, because it's in those first moments where our breathing gets shallow and our skin

hot that we can move from just reacting destructively to actually responding mindfully. Breathe.

Paying good attention is a spiritual discipline. We pay good attention when we notice those around us are human just like we are. We pay good attention when we stop to listen and actually see the person in front of us. We pay good attention when we wait to send the email until the next day. Presence helps us be honest. Presence moves us toward compassion.

And what would our lives communicate if we committed to practicing the awareness that is needed for peacemaking and love?

A group of guys jumped a young man in Philadelphia and left him with a broken jaw. For days, the guy was scared, shaking, wondering what to do. He decided to go back to the spot where it happened. He posted his picture up, with his name and contact information. And the flyer said, "I was beaten up by some guys on this corner. If anyone knows who did this, please let them know I do not hold this against them but care about them, and if I have done anything against anyone, I ask for forgiveness. I want whoever did this to know that I am not angry with you. I care about you and invite you to get to know me. Maybe we could play some kickball or something."

With love, he stopped the cycle of anger in its tracks. He demands that they see the humanity in him. He is just as deserving of as much love and safety and thriving as the group of guys who broke his jaw. He sees them. That kind of love takes a lot of courage.

Eight years ago, I lived in an intentional Christian community in North Carolina. We shared houses, cars,



food, work, prayers. We shared sadness, anger, hope and joy too. We led youth group every Wednesday for the young people in the neighborhood. On one of my first weeks, while I was leading the younger group, I got really mad. The kids weren't really listening. A few of the fourth and fifth graders were running around getting everyone distracted. I felt disrespected. And then two of them started yelling at each other, calling each other names, throwing things at each other, and I then I felt like there was a threat. I didn't stop to think before I started responding. I ran toward them, fire in my eyes. I corralled them by yelling right back at them. I didn't even notice the ones who were still trying to engage the lesson.

I don't remember how the situation eventually calmed down, but it did, and we sat down to pray. I was shaking and embarrassed. I knew needed to start apologizing. But before we even wrapped up youth group for the night, Zebulon, one of our youngest, put his arms around my neck and sat behind me. He laid his head on my shoulder and gave me sweet love pats. And I felt all the tension and fear leave my body.

We're angry, we hold grudges, so we really deserve an angry God. But that's not who God is, Jesus is saying. In fact, that's the scandal of grace that Jesus proves with his life. By loving, he disrupts the lie of resentment and retribution. He proves that God is love, even when we're angry. God loves us all the way until we aren't angry anymore. Until we feel grace and can let go. And God loves us all the way until we're caught up in that love too.