

"Anger."            2 Samuel 18:5-9; 15, 31-33; Ps. 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2  
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church  
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Anger. We know what it is. We know how destructive it can be. We know what a dangerous emotion it is. We know how good it feels to stop holding back and just let 'r rip.

And we know that we would be living in a dream world if we thought that getting baptized somehow inoculated us against sin and kept us from evil or from the darker side of human emotions.

All of us, at one time or another, have lost our temper and said things we wish we hadn't.

There was a man named Bob Monkhouse who got quite angry and blew up at the manager of his local dry cleaners.

A little while later a red ballpoint pen leaked all over the pocket of one of his white shirts and left a terrible stain. Bob's wife said, "It won't wash out. I'll try the dry cleaners."

So, she took the shirt with the red stain to the same dry cleaner where Bob had reamed out the manager. The manager took a long look at the dark red stain on the front of Bob's shirt and then looked at Bob's wife and said quietly, "Good shot. (From "Just Say a Few Words." 1988.)

Our anger can leave quite a stain on our relationships and our lives.

The ancient philosopher Aristotle said: "Anyone can become angry. That is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right

degree, at the right time, for the right purpose and in the right way - that is not easy."

Sometimes we transfer the anger we are feeling toward someone and attack an innocent bystander: Parents are angry with one another and the children bear the brunt of it. A colleague at work is angry with the boss and the rest of the office is punished by the misplaced anger. A member of the church is angry with the pastor and the office person gets chewed out on the pastor's day off.

It's important to know who we are angry with and why. And then it is also important that there be a balance between the action and the response. The saying, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth", became the law of ancient times in an effort to stem the tide of unbridled revenge and vengeance, where one offense led to a more serious response, and that, in turn, could lead to war.

To be sure, anger is a powerful emotional response that must be handled carefully. The writer of Ephesians is counseling the Christian community to be aware that anger has its place and it will happen, even among loving, caring, Christ-centered people.

Chief among his advice is the caution not to "let the sun go down on your anger." He is in favor of dealing with the things that cause anger in such a way that we don't brood over them or allow them to take on a life of their own.

That's all well and good, but it is very demanding and challenging, especially when we enjoy being angry, when it energizes us and when we frankly like the rush we get from our rage. That's understandable, but not very commendable.

What makes us angry? Can it be something as mundane as not leaving the church kitchen in good shape after an event or not leaving a classroom the way we found it?

When our son, Micah, was in college in New York City he lived in a tiny apartment with another student who had a very different idea of what "clean" meant.

The mess in the apartment made Micah angry and Nancy and I can still remember the phone calls and the rage and frustration.

Micah so rarely saw the other guy it was hard to get things resolved in any reasonable way. Since they were never around at the same time, all they had were large lists and good reasons for rage. The proverbial sun had been going down on their anger for quite a while.

Sometimes our schedules get in the way of dealing with our anger in a timely fashion, but there again, speed isn't everything. We really can't commend the one who flies off the handle at the least provocation, either. He may be acting in a timely way, but it is hardly what we would call biblical. Someone engaging in road rage is not letting the sun go down on their anger, but perhaps we'd all be a bit safer if they could at least count to ten!

Our newspapers and newscasts are full of examples of how anger can destroy relationships and lives. Someone is angry at women or his lack of social skills and his answer is to shoot up a fitness center. Someone else is angry at a loss of a job and the answer is to create a hostage situation in their former place of employment.

Sometimes our anger is "righteous". We see injustice and it makes us see red. We channel our emotions into positive avenues of working for social change, volunteering to meet the needs of others, lobbying our

politicians and encouraging others to do the same so that a wrong can be righted.

But, of course, not all anger is righteous anger. Not all anger should be acted upon. There are places in Scripture where anger is a negative emotion, a dangerous emotion, one that makes the list of things we are to remove from our lives. Admonitions against anger are found throughout the New Testament: in Romans and James, Colossians and Corinthians.

Cain is angry with his brother Abel and it leads to murder. The elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son is angry and it does not lead to anything good. The Pharisees and the Scribes are angry with Jesus and it leads to crucifixion.

But elsewhere there are instances of anger being expressed that has a cleansing effect. Jesus got angry. He was angry with lack of faith, angry with the abuse of the Temple precincts, angry that death is so much a part of life.

Here in Ephesians the writer instructs us that there may be times when we are angry. But along with warning us not to let the sun go down on our anger the writer calls us to remember that we are part of one another. We are not our own. We were bought with a price. God has called us together to be the Church, the Body of Christ, an organic, dynamic, living reality.

As parts of the same body we need one another. To not be together is akin to amputation. The health of the body demands that we find healthy ways to address the things that are out of balance, that cause us to be angry.

We are to speak the truth in love and to work to build up the body of Christ, not to tear it down. What good does it do any of us to be angry with our nose and literally cut it off? Not a good idea.

Allowing anger to go unaddressed simply allows it to fester. It also creates distance between the event that triggered the anger and the response to it. When it finally does come out it may seem totally out of proportion and disconnected to the actual events that caused it in the first place.

We've seen this happen in our own lives and in our church.

Unfortunately, we in the church are often afflicted with the disease of terminal "niceness". We can't imagine risking hurting someone else's feelings. The things that bother us become our "cross to bear" rather than a call from God to make things better. We'd even rather put up with unjust situations or out of balance people than do the tough work of addressing things that ought to be addressed.

But who decides what should be on the agenda and who sets the timetable? Maybe letting the sun go down on it is the right response... at least for a while, at least until we sort it out and consider a few things. We need to ask ourselves whether our anger is honest and true. Is it a response out of a desire to improve a situation or is it self-serving?

In the final analysis, as Christians who worship the God who knows our hearts and our souls, we need to ask ourselves whether we'd be comfortable explaining our anger to Jesus. Is our anger a call from God to act or is it a challenge to act our age, to grow in spiritual maturity and depth and get over it?

Sometimes our anger can tell us what we care about, what we are passionate about and where our hearts are. Sometimes our anger can guide us toward the truth, but we must always leave room for God to be at work and not assume that we know the full mind of God or wholly understand the intentions of another. If we are in fact part of the same body, then we are accountable and responsible to one another.

If I, or someone else, has done something to anger you and your anger is righteous and godly, why would you not want to get that out and to square things away? Why let the sun go down on it? Why not have that conversation? Yes, it will be uncomfortable. Yes, it may even be painful. But if our shared desire is for the body of Christ to be strengthened and for us to be able to focus on things that matter for the sake of the Kingdom of God, why let that anger have any more time to gain any more power in your life?

Probably part of the reason for keeping your anger to yourself is the same as my reason for keeping mine to myself: I am afraid. I am afraid of the outcomes. I fear that the God-glue holding us together may not be strong enough to sustain the pressure.

But we need to remember that some of the strongest growth that occurs between people is the growth that comes from conflict, from adversity, from girding up our loins and taking a deep breath and trusting God.

It may mean asking for forgiveness along with a sincere desire not to repeat the offending behavior. It may mean extending forgiveness and grace to another and, in a sense, letting them out of the jail that we have placed them in by our refusal to deal with the things that make up the bars and the walls between us.

This is tough stuff. But it is the work we are called to do "in here" for the sake of the work we are called to do "out there".

Be angry when it is necessary and righteous and then do something constructive with that anger. Don't let it continue to be a destructive force in your life or in your church.

For some of us the sun has been going down on our anger for quite a while. But there's still some daylight left! For Jesus' sake, let us find ways to strengthen the body of Christ in the bonds of peace and understanding and love so that our witness to the world - in word and in deed - will ring true.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.