

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Meditation for the Community Interfaith Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving
November 27, 2008 in the Old Broad Street Church
Scripture Readings: Psalm 37:1-9, James 1:19-20, and Matthew 5:21-24

TIRED OF ANGER

Give up anger, abandon fury, do not be vexed; it can only do harm.

For years, we were told that anger was something we could “bottle up” like a noxious liquid that would ferment and eat away at our insides until it burst forth as rage and, perhaps, violence. People who seemed to absorb life’s shocks without getting angry were suspected of having this bottled-up anger that had to be hurting them emotionally and might be making them dangerous.

More recently, we have learned that anger is not like a liquid that stays bottled up inside me and that the more I practice getting angry, the more anger becomes my response to life.¹ “Practice makes perfect.” Practicing anger develops an angry personality, making me someone who handles negative feelings by “acting out.” Recently, I was engaged in an e-mail conversation with a group of therapists about what happens when someone “acts out” in anger. One very experienced psychiatrist and theorist said he has come to believe anger is always preceded by a more vulnerable affect such as fear, distress, or shame. To connect with the person who has acted out, we must relate to those vulnerable affects behind the anger. He concluded, “I have found that real anger . . . always acts as an effective impediment to emotional connection.” I am not saying that anger is always wrong, bad, or even unhelpful. There are times to get angry and ways for controlled anger to serve a good purpose, but rage disconnects us from each other.

We have been living through a period of sustained anger and so have become more and more disconnected as a society. We have road rage, job rage, and holiday shopping rage; we have increased rudeness and violence in public, in our schools, and in our homes. Our political discourse degenerated into nasty sound bites and shouting matches. Digital communication provides the cover from which people write things to each other they would not say in the same room, face to face. So, we have people sitting alone in front of television and computer screens getting angrier and angrier, in isolation.

As the rage and rudeness increased, people withdrew into safe, like-minded company where beliefs, opinions, jokes, and prejudices could be shared without challenge. Outsiders

were regarded as people who just didn't "get it," then labeled as some bad type and dismissed, as though they were mere types and not real people at all. Such labeling (liberal, right-wing nut, socialist, Nazi, religious nut, etc.) added to the anger the extra element of disgust with its emotional equivalent of spitting.

Further damage has been done to children who have been taught by example that the acceptable way to handle negative feelings of any kind is to get angry. My psychologist friends call it the "macho script."² If what you're feeling is fear, get angry. If something embarrasses you, even slightly, tell yourself you've been dissed, and lash out at somebody, hurt someone as a demand for what poses in a culture of rage as honor and respect. But if anger impedes emotional connection, then as a society, we have been teaching our children to destroy the bonds of family and community, isolating themselves from friendship and love.

I sense (and hope I'm right) that people are growing tired of all the anger. Tired of the shouting, interrupting, and trash talking. Tired of the contempt distorting our faces when we look at each other. Weary of arguments that generate heat without shedding light on problems. Sick of the ranting, the rudeness, the slander, and the deliberate misunderstandings that exaggerate the other person's position to make it sound radical and dangerous.

Biblical faith is relational for two primary reasons. First and foremost, God loves us and created us to love. The second is that God loves *all of us* and has built into our very nature the need for each other. God created us to need love, friendship, and community, and those relationships should be mutual. We need to give as well as receive.

The human community is broken into non-communities, fractured so many different ways that we are mostly strangers to each other. In our divided-ness, with all the fears, suspicions, and resentments it fosters, we have developed a Superman view of what it means to be strong: the man of steel, powerful, invincible, and able to stand alone. In contrast, the prophets present us with the brokenhearted God whose willing vulnerability comes from committing to us in love and faithfulness. Yet, this vulnerable God is anything but weak, which tells me we have gotten it wrong about strength, about courage, and about honor.

On this Thanksgiving morning, 2008, at the end of a historic presidential race and the beginning of what seems to be historic economic distress, I suggest to you and urge that we come together in making every effort to shift our thinking from the vindictive to the restorative – from what defeats, puts down, punishes, and expels to what enables mutual understanding and healing. Vindictive thinking takes pride in power over others and the ability to hit back harder. It isolates us from each other, making every issue of life a matter of winners and losers. It feeds on gloating and shaming. It fosters suspicion and fear. Are we not growing weary of being suspicious, even afraid, of each other? Are we not beginning

to have second thoughts about incarcerating more of our own people than any other developed nation on earth, especially when the violence and meanness in our society only increase as we lock up more and more people? Meanwhile, the victims of crime find themselves left out of the process called justice – unrecognized, unheard, and unhealed.

There are effective movements toward societal and personal healing, and they come under the heading of “restorative.” They enable offenders to face the real people they have harmed and victims to tell their stories of what was done to them, telling them directly, face to face with the person who did the harm. The results are astounding, and hard-boiled skeptics have experienced the healing that happens when we stop depersonalizing the offenses, as though only the law or the rules were broken but no real, living people were harmed or even involved. Too many offenders come to see themselves as the victims of an unfair, cruel system and so “take their punishment” with no clue about the damage they have done or the people they have actually hurt. Restorative measures are not a way of “beating the rap,” getting away with wrongdoing; they are a way of healing the offenders and their families, the victims and their families, and the community.³

I believe it is high time for us to be tired of all the anger and polarization in our land and in our fractured communities. Thanksgiving is a communal act, a shared response of joy and gratitude for the goodness of God. Thanksgiving is not supposed to leave anyone out; hence the repeated biblical reminder not to forget the socially vulnerable – the foreign worker, the widow, and the orphan.

In hard economic times, anger can surge as frustrations mount and fear permeates life. We need to keep that surge from happening. If we fail, there will be scapegoating, especially of non-citizens among us. There will be more hate talk with its potential for sparking violence, particularly among the young. We need to reach across barriers with understanding, but to gain understanding, we have to listen to each other’s stories. One of our hymns offers this haunting line: “Races and peoples, lo! we stand divided, And sharing not our griefs, no joy can share.”

Vindictive or restorative, which spirit comes from God? Would you, please, right now, look at me or someone don’t know and clench your hand into a fist. Squeeze. Feel the change in your face. Now open your hand, extend it, and smile. Do you feel the change in your face now? I think that’s what a young Muslim man I heard speak called a “physical prayer,” but not quite, because it doesn’t really become a physical prayer until unclenching our fists and opening our hands goes beyond symbolism and reaches out to someone who has not trusted us before. Thank you for coming this morning. Happy Thanksgiving, and God bless you with peace and healing in your own lives. Amen.

Notes

1. Carol Tavris, PhD, *Anger: the Misunderstood Emotion*.
2. The term “script” comes from Silvan S. Tomkins and has been explained by Donald L. Nathanson, MD, executive director of the Silvan S. Tomkins Institute, in his article, “What’s a Script?” (available to read on the Web site at www.tomkins.org). In my words (not those of Tomkins or Nathanson) a script is an assembly in the mind of a set of experiences (“scenes” Tomkins called them, following his playwright language of script) we then use as a type when we process new experiences and respond to them. The macho script responds to experiences that trigger the shame affect by “moving us” to the “attack other” pole on Nathanson’s compass of shame (*Shame and Pride*, p. 305ff) So, if I follow that macho script when someone embarrasses me, puts me down, makes me feel fear, or threatens the fulfillment of my desire, I get angry and attack in some way.
3. Ted Wachtel, *Real Justice: How we can revolutionize our response to wrongdoing*, The Piper’s Press, 1997. See also Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, Good Books, 2002.