

Sunset

“Be angry, and then what?”

Ephesians 4:25-27

Sixth in the Series, *Ups and Downs on the Emotional Roller Coaster*

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June 27, 2010

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Getting Mad

I once lived in an apartment with friends, across the hall from more good friends. One evening my apartment decided to pull a prank on my friends across the hall. So, I dressed in a very ragged sweater, messed up my relatively long hair and beard, plastered black mustache wax all over my face and then made additional efforts to take on the appearance of something unnatural. We then made a call on our friends. When they let us in I started making growls and other startling monster sounds, while I jumped around, attracting our friends' full attention. They were entertained. Meanwhile, one of my other roommates went around their apartment with a can of shaving cream. It was still in the days of land-lines; and he did a good job of squirting a dab in each of their telephone ear pieces. We then went back to our apartment and gave them a ring.

The reaction unfolded beyond our expectation. We heard a bellow from across the hall. Their door flew open as ours was quickly closed and locked. While we were still roaring with laughter there someone started pounding at the door. It wasn't at first obvious that the pounding was growing more intense. It started shaking the apartment walls. Then it got heavier and heavier and more evenly spaced, almost as though one was not pounding...but rather *kicking*...until all-at-once the locked door few open with flying wooden shrapnel of what had been our door jamb. One of my friends came in, shaving cream plastered on the side of his head, yelling something to the effect that this wasn't all that funny.

Apparently we had pushed one of his buttons.

Sometimes you want to tell people to *take it easy. Get a handle on it. Control yourself!* Yet you know that sometimes there is no control: as my father used to warn me when, as a kid, I tried someone else's patience to excess, “Sometimes you just pull the rubber band until it won't pull any further. Then, what do you expect?” What

happens when your rubber band is pulled too far? And perhaps more important, what do you do to keep it from the proverbial snap?

The Down and Up Sides of Anger

There's a curious story in the Hebrew Scriptures' about a Mesopotamian magician by the name of Balaam. Balaam was known for his effectiveness in calling out blessings and curses on people and armies. The King of Moab had seen the influx of Israelites and was afraid that they would overwhelm his kingdom. So he sent for Balaam to come to him in order to curse the people of Israel. Balaam was on his way and the angel of the Lord came to stop him at any cost – invisible to the prophet, but not to his donkey who turned aside once – and Balaam hit him. The angel appeared a second time, and he hit the donkey again. The third time the angel of the Lord appeared, and there was nowhere to turn so the donkey just stopped and lay down under the prophet.

The button was pushed. The rubber band snapped. Not aware of the danger but only of his frustration, Balaam took a stick and started to beat the donkey. Then the animal opened its mouth to speak. "Why are you hitting me?" What would you do if your donkey spoke? There's Balaam, mouth wide open, an ancient Dr. Doolittle, coaxed into an intelligent conversation with an animal.

This is one of only two times in the Bible that an animal speaks. The other time is in the Garden, with a talking serpent.¹ This time, though, the animal's aim was not to destroy, but rather to save; and with eyes now open wide enough to see the spiritual reality around him, Balaam discovered the peril he entered. By hindering his way the animal was helping him, protecting him. Then in this encounter the prophet learned to listen to the intent of God and to place his agenda aside.²

Anger could get a bad rap by the parts of this story I chose to highlight so far. But Balaam was not the only one in the story who got angry. The story actually starts with *God's anger*. It says, "God's anger was kindled because Balaam was going..."

In and of itself, anger is not a bad thing. Though you might want some comfortable emotions like happiness and contentment; and you might not welcome uncomfortable emotions like fear and anger: emotions are neither good nor bad. They just are.

Feelings are your responses to internal and external conditions that usually help you respond to life appropriately. If something is pleasing, you become happy and are drawn toward it. If it's dangerous, you become afraid and avoid it if you can; at any rate, your senses become keen, and you are made ready to respond.

Psychologists tell us that anger is actually a secondary emotion, which means you are apt to feel something else, like helplessness or frustration or hurt, first. Then you become angry second.³ Some even suggest that anger is a choice. You have the capacity to frame whatever it is that happened and decide whether to get mad or not.

Balaam was going forward and the donkey turned to the side twice then lay down. Balaam thought he knew what was going on: he framed his experience by what he thought he knew: he had an insolent animal that needed to be taught a lesson. So his anger drove him out-of-control. He told his donkey that if he had a sword he'd kill him. (It kind of tells you something about what can happen nowadays when someone can put a gun in their hand).

Neither good nor bad: anger is a feeling; and if you keep it in perspective and don't let it drive you out of control it can actually be useful. Anger can be a great motivator. Several years ago when the San Antonio Spurs were on their way of prevailing over the Detroit Pistons for the NBA National Championship Manu Ginobili of the Spurs got frustrated with himself over a couple of lackluster quarters of basketball. Then, he said, he got angry with himself and used his anger as a motivator to produce a phenomenal offensive run against the Pistons. It made me made just sick to think about it.

There are things worth becoming angry over. In the 1976 film, *Network* news anchor Howard Beal listed the world's woes like a litany: crime in the streets, unemployment, and pollution; and said he didn't have any solutions but, "first you've got to get mad."⁴ That can be the first step for figuring out what to do about a problem and then doing it with a vengeance.

For the good.

There are things I think we need to become angry about. World-wide, tens of thousands die each day needlessly because food that should be available is withheld by politics and greed. That's reason to get angry. Every time a child is killed in a drive-by shooting, every time top management officers increase their salaries and benefits while

a list of their workers are let go, every time someone is abused because their minority status has made them vulnerable – I hope you become angry. Angry enough to be motivated.

That was God's type of anger: a motivation to protect Israel before the people even knew that they should be scared.

“Be angry,” said the Apostle Paul, “Be angry and sin not.”⁵ There's something healthy in feeling what you're feeling. Anger held-in can be destructive. It can raise your blood pressure, produce edginess, and make you depressed. It's better to name it, understand it, figure out what it's about and, instead of letting it control you, learn to put it to good use.

But whatever you do, don't hit the donkey. Count to ten like you've heard before: open your eyes to see what angel it is that's in the road. The American Psychological Association encourages this: learn to relax, ask questions, listen, find out what's really happening before you assume; talk about your feelings; approach your frustrations with a healthy sense of humor; get up and go to a different place if you need to; and choose the right action to take.⁶ Don't kick the donkey: instead take a respect-filled stand.

Get it Together

Paul said, “Don't let the sun set on your anger.” Don't let it consume you.

I picked up the pieces of our shattered door. I replaced the jamb with new wood and covered it with paint. But what else was it that had been broken? What did my friend's explosion say of some other pain he carried inside or of the way he experienced a prank we only intended to be funny? Had we done wrong? Should we address it?

There's a reason Paul says “Don't let the sun set on your anger.” Perhaps it's enough to tell us what we have to do as people of the church.

By sunset: recognize what it is that has you worked up. By sunset, strive to understand it and address it. By sunset, start to move on to the third emotion:

overriding love.

Restorative justice took place in South Africa when Archbishop Desmond Tutu rehearsed and reminded people who had suffered incredible violence that they were to hate the injustice and not the perpetrator. He told them that because of Jesus' love, they needed to forgive, seeking equality and peace, and not pay-back for all they had suffered. This, because they needed to see the oppressors as children of God who in their own way, were also burdened by the injustice they perpetrated. He and other Christian leaders worked so hard and so long to get the message across; then Nelson Mandela and others who had suffered years of imprisonment, beatings and insults *lived* it out. Mandela came to realize that his oppressors were not the men they seemed to be but better men than how they behaved.⁷ So they reframed their experience and used their anger as motivation to march on to liberty and restoration. They forgave by the power of an overriding love.

They turned the other cheek, radically.

And that, in every nation and every era, is the task of Jesus' followers.

Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." In other words, "Be compassionate, as God is full of compassion." Don't hit the donkey. *Don't get even, get love.*

¹ Thomas B. Dozeman, "Numbers" *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* vol. 1. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1996. pp 183-184.

² Ibid.

³ Betsy Mann, "Children and Anger." *Child & Family Canada* website. http://www.cfc-efc.ca/docs/cafrp/00009_3n.htm

⁴ Paddy Chayefsky (writer), *Network* (film), directed by Sidney Lumet. Warner Bros., 1976.

⁵ Ephesians 4:26

⁶ © 2005 American Psychological Association Office of Public Affairs, 750 First Street, NE, Washington, DC, 20002-4242. Phone: 202-336-5700 •• TDD/TTY: 202-336-612. Fax: 202-336-5708

<http://www.apa.org/pubinfo/anger.html>

⁷ Richard Stengel, *Mandela's Way*. New York: Crown Publishers. © 2009. p 121.