

**Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2 “Healthy Anger” Rev. Janet Chapman 8/4/24**

**The Olympics are in full swing and in case you haven't heard the news, coming in 2028, when LA is the summer host, baseball and softball will be included. I thought it was odd they weren't included this year, but the host country has a lot to say on which sports are featured. France decided they had better chances to medal with sports like breakdancing while the International Olympic Committee argued baseball doesn't have global relevance. Go figure... The stories that come out of baseball stars alone have relevance in my mind. The legendary, hot-headed but talented Billy Martin, manager of the Yankees, tells a story of going hunting with Mickey Mantle. Mickey had a friend who would let them hunt on his ranch, so when they arrived, Mantle told Billy to wait in the car while he checked in with his friend. The friend quickly gave permission but asked Mantle if he would do him a favor. He had a pet mule in the barn who was going blind and in pain from multiple health issues. He didn't have the heart to put him out of his misery, so he asked Mickey to shoot the mule for him. When Mickey came back to the car, he pretended to be angry. He scowled and slammed the door. Billy asked him what was wrong, and Mickey said his friend wouldn't let them hunt. He said, "I'm so mad at this guy, I'm going out to his barn and shoot one of his mules!" Martin protested, "You can't do that!" "Just watch me," Mantle said. He jumped out of the car with his rifle, ran inside the barn, and shot the mule. As he was leaving, he heard 2 shots and saw that Billy had taken out his rifle as well. "What are you doing?" he said. Martin yelled back, face red with anger, "We'll show that son of a gun – I just killed two of his cows!"**

**It is a reminder to us all of the importance of anger management – one of the virtues emphasized in chapter 4 of Ephesians. It has traditionally been accepted that this letter was written by Paul from his jail cell while the known world was falling apart. It is a treasury of his own teachings meant to encourage the faithful in a way of life that was in danger of extinction. He coaches his readers, “Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” “Be angry but do not sin... be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” Barbara Brown Taylor asserts, “If the Christian church has lost its moral compass and authority in our time, it is at least partly because we have not taken Paul’s advice.” We have our own manager’s handbook which leads us to be polite but noncommittal, wanting above all to be liked. We do not live as though we were members of one another. We fight with as much destructiveness as non-believers, dividing ourselves into “us” and “them” at the drop of a hat. We are not kind so much as we are nice, which is about as bland a virtue as you can get.**

**But Paul had a different vision of the Christian community. Niceness didn’t concern him. He didn’t give two hoots about being liked. He knew that when real people live in real community with one another, they will discover real differences and suffer real discord. Discord can’t be swept under the rug and needs to be addressed in an open and timely manner, thus, that age-old wisdom arises, “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger.” This is true whether the community is a family, a neighborhood, a church, a society, even a marriage. A man who had been married for many decades once confessed to his**

friend about his marriage, “Ok, it’s true, we fight. But to be honest, we have never gone to bed mad. Of course, one year we were up for three months.” Very few of us were ever taught that anger is a part of true love. Even fewer of us have been taught how to handle our anger so that it is part of our health and not part of our sickness. Paul seems to know that being angry and sinning are two different things. The one doesn’t have to lead to the other, especially when love is the guiding factor. But it often does, which is why so many of us were taught to hide our anger. The truth is that it is entirely possible to be angry without sinning, that is, without separating ourselves from others or hurting them, in order to spare ourselves the same thing. At its most basic level, anger is termed an “emergency emotion.”

Someone or something threatens you – your safety, your loved ones, your home, your values, your self-esteem – and some very predictable things happen inside of you. Your heart rate and blood pressure go up – your pupils dilate – your breathing gets shallow, your mouth grows dry, blood flows away from your hands and feet (in case of injury) which gives you sweaty palms. All of these, Olympic athletes learn early on, are detrimental to a solid performance. Your body is prepared to fight the threat or to flee it, but most of this happens unconsciously. Meanwhile, all your mind knows is that you are mad, and right underneath that mad is a whole lotta fear or pain. One psychiatric hospital chaplain noted that it is much easier to feel the anger than the hurt, so human nature is to prefer the mad. Displaying anger can make a person feel tough, but on the inside, vulnerability is flourishing.

I'm happy to recommend to you the sequel movie "Inside Out 2" for young and old alike, if you haven't seen it yet. It puts a creative flair on being true to ourselves and the discrepancy which grows over time between what we reveal on the outside and what is honestly erupting on the inside. Implosive anger, we discover, is as fully destructive as explosive anger. The movie reminded me that consistent anger can indicate a need for intervention, although such persons often resist intervention, because they use anger as a weapon. A story is told about two classmates who take a school trip to the zoo, where a new lion exhibit has just opened. Afterward, one girl invites the other over to play. She was showing her friend around the house. "This is the kitchen... here's my bedroom. Here's the den. Do you have a den in your house?" she asked. Her playmate responded, "No, we don't. My dad just growls all around the house."

The reality is that almost no one denies anger successfully. It either burrows inward or erupts. Frederick Buechner writes that anger, when it resorts to being a sin, becomes a feast fit for a king. with the chief drawback being that what you are wolfing down is yourself – the skeleton at the feast is you. You roll your tongue over long-held grievances, you lick your wounds, you savor the last morsel of the pain you have inflicted. Then you blame yourself for getting mad in the first place. You tell yourself you are a bad person, that you should be able to forgive those who trespass against you no matter what they have done to you, and you resolve once again to ignore your anger in hopes that it will all go away. Only it doesn't, and it just turns into an ulcer or a bad back or a depression that deepens every day. Some folks seek help at this point and the advice they are often

given is “Just let the anger out.” If that is as far as it goes, they generally become walking volcanoes, spewing unpleasantness on whoever gets in their way. It is a surprising thing but psychological studies show that venting anger does not diminish angry feelings. It actually increases them, by stimulating the emergency emotion all over again. So what is an angry person to do? Paul says, “Be angry but do not sin.” Live in love, speak the truth, be kind, forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. When you feel you have been wronged, consider following the idea of writing down your response before voicing it. Try to make it kind but firm...something like “I’ve got something that has been bothering me. In fact, I guess I’m feeling upset. Perhaps I have misunderstood the situation, but when you have the opportunity, I’d like to talk with you about it.” If given the chance with that person, lay out your perception of what you heard or experienced, owning that you may have misread the situation, and ask for clarification. Experts encourage us to avoid blaming and shaming as those only cut off the conversation. Allow the person the opportunity to share with you information that you may not be aware of, or explain the motives behind what was done or said. It is a start towards understanding others and recognizing our words and actions matter.

Christians, of all people, should know that there is such a thing as a good fight, a healthy disagreement between folks. Read the Bible. God fought with those God loved very much – Abraham, Moses, David, Job. Jacob wrestled an angel. Jonah got sent to his room inside a great fish. Jesus yelled at his disciples as if they were truant schoolboys. He called the Pharisees every name in the book to

**get their attention, but never was violence involved, never did Jesus stop loving his adversaries nor cut them off from the community. Paul got mad at some in the church communities to whom he wrote. From day one, healthy anger was meant to heal not to harm, to invite and not to divide. That is what makes a fight a good one, and every one of us can learn to live by this virtue when we remember that healthy anger is a part of true love. As stated in the final verse, “Let us live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Amen.**