

## “Ticked Off!” March 14, 2010

You may have heard of the exchange that occurred between a husband and wife. The husband said, “When I get mad at you, you never fight back. How do you control your anger?” His wife responded with, “I clean the toilet.” “How does that help?” her husband asked. “I use your toothbrush,” she answered.

It seems to me that little joke brings to light many of the issues surrounding anger—an emotion that we all experience from time to time. Yet I’ve found it’s an emotion that most of us are uncomfortable with, and don’t really know appropriate and healthy ways to deal with it. That’s what I want us to think about a bit this morning.

Dictionary.com defines anger this way: “a strong feeling of displeasure and belligerence aroused by a wrong; wrath; ire.” Someone else has defined anger as “an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage.” Anger is a natural emotion, and has the potential to be productive, if handled properly. However, anger can get out of control, and become quite destructive, which is what happens often in situations of domestic violence. However we define it, most of us recognize anger when we see or experience it, either in ourselves or others.

Anger often results when our expectations are not met, leaving us with a sense that we have no control over what happens, that we’re helpless. It can be caused by either internal or external events. Perhaps we’re frustrated and angry with our boss or a co-worker, and maybe we’re incensed with traffic snarls or a flight delay. Or maybe we’re worrying about and brooding over our personal dilemma, and can feel ourselves fuming, ready to explode. Whatever it is that incites us, we can feel it—our hearts pounding, fists clenched, jaw tightened, blood pressure rising.

I hate to admit it, but I can certainly identify with this issue around anger, because I tend to have a temper. For me, anger seems to erupt most readily when I’m driving. For instance, just the other day, I was negotiating one of the roundabouts in Carmel, preparing to head southbound on Keystone Parkway.

As most of us probably know, the roundabouts are constructed in such a way that a driver only needs to watch for traffic coming from the left—and not all three directions. If

someone is coming, then drivers are to yield to cars in the roundabout. Well, it so happens that I was one of those in the roundabouts, and a car came flying toward the roundabout, not at all willing to yield to me. I had to slam on my brakes to keep from being hit, and frankly, it ticked me off!

The reality is that, if everyone is courteous and drives reasonably, roundabouts are safer and move traffic better than traffic lights or 4-way stops, but not when someone blatantly ignores proper protocol! Now that’s a silly little incident that didn’t amount to anything, but I could feel myself responding in anger, because I felt I had been wronged; I had not been given the right-of-way that I deserved.

The problem with anger is not that we become angry at times, but rather that the anger is often misdirected or out of proportion to the “crime.” It takes control of us, and we lose all sense of reason and rational behavior. That’s when anger can become hurtful and even deadly. Writing in *The New York Times Magazine*, Maggie Scarf said, “Getting angry can sometimes be like leaping into a wonderfully responsive sports car, gunning the motor, taking off at high speed and then discovering the brakes are out of order.” That’s when anger becomes problematic—at home, at work, at school, at play.

What are we to do when we become angry? What are healthy ways to deal with our anger? I wonder if our Bible passage for today might be helpful. This is Paul writing to the people in the church at Ephesus, telling them what a life that is changed by faith is like. Our version is from *The Message*, and says this: “Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don’t use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don’t stay angry. Don’t go to bed angry. Don’t give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life.”

There are a lot of things to contemplate in this passage. For one thing, it’s acknowledging that becoming angry is part of what it means to be human. Every one of us becomes angry at one time or another, but it’s how we express it, and how we deal with it that determines how positive or negative it is. If we use anger to get back at someone, say, by cleaning the toilet with the other person’s toothbrush, while a bit humorous without causing great physical harm, it’s still rather passive-aggressive, and not very healthy.

The idea of getting away from an angry situation and giving some time and space for the

emotions to diffuse is a good one. That could be accomplished by taking a walk, going into another room, counting to ten, taking a deep breath, or any number of other ways that allow the possibility to regain control of our emotions and be able to respond in a more coherent and rational way. As Seneca stated, “The greatest remedy for anger is delay.”

Psychologists tell us that there are three ways to deal with our angry feelings. They are expressing, suppressing and calming. Expressing our feelings in a non-aggressive manner is probably the healthiest way to let our anger out. In order for this to happen, we have to learn how to make clear what our needs are and how to get them met without hurting others. It's important that we not be pushy or demanding or hostile, but always be respectful both of ourselves and others.

Another, but less helpful, way to deal with anger is to hold it in and suppress it. The aim is to inhibit the anger in such a way that it can be converted into more constructive behavior. The danger in not expressing our anger appropriately is that it can be turned inward in unhealthy ways, and can affect our physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

The third way mentioned above is to learn techniques for calming our anger. This means we need to learn how to control both our outward behavior and our internal responses. We need to find ways to lower our heart rate and calm ourselves down, allowing the angry feelings to subside. Certainly, one of the ways that can happen is through practicing relaxation techniques, such as those we can learn through yoga—like deep breathing, using relaxing images, repeating a word or phrase that has a way of calming us.

One of the toughest issues around anger, it seems to me, is directing our anger at the right source at the right time in the right way. As 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.”

That means we need to slow our anger down enough to think rationally. Logic defeats anger, which at times becomes irrational. We need to remind ourselves that the world is not out to get us, that that other driver wasn't intent on hitting me, that our flight was not intentionally delayed by the weather, and so on. We need to

change our thinking about the situations that tend to provoke anger in us.

Humor is another way to defuse anger. As Wayne Dyer said, “It's impossible for you to be angry and laugh at the same time. Anger and laughter are mutually exclusive and you have the power to choose either.” Humor has a way of giving us a more balanced perspective on whatever we're frustrated about. Taking a step back may allow us to see the silliness of the situation we're facing, so it's always helpful to lighten up a little and not take ourselves so seriously. Let's laugh a little.

You see, the reality is that anger has a lot to do with wanting things my way, and not being willing to consider other ways of thinking and other ways of being. That's really a pretty self-centered, selfish point of view that inhibits relationships and thwarts happiness. Instead, we need to realize that we share this world with millions of others who have their own agendas and needs and wants and hurts, and have the same emotions we do. Maybe not being so insistent on having things our way and having a little looser rein on life just might benefit all of us when it comes to the art of living.

And that leads me to some wise words found in our Bible passage: “Don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry.” When we get off our high horse, when we let go of our self-centered ways, when we allow the full weight of our angry words and actions to sink in, then it's time to say the words, “I'm sorry,” and really mean them. Those are words that can begin to heal the brokenness in our relationships, mend the hurt in our souls. Those words remind us of the need to temper our anger, and if we become angry, to make sure we deal with it in the most loving way possible.

At least, that's what I think God would have us do. How about you?

Closing:

Today we've been talking about anger, and there's so much we could say, but maybe the best thought for us to leave with comes from words by Ambrose Bierce, who said, “Speak when you are angry, and you will make the best speech you'll ever regret.”

I hope and pray we can remember and heed his words today and every day.

Have a good Sunday and go in peace. Amen.

