

"Not a Sorbet"

Matthew 5:21-37

2.16.20

Community Church of Sebastopol

Some scriptures are comfortable (and comforting), like the last couple of weeks in the Sermon on the Mount-- we are happy to hear "blessed are the peacemakers" and "you are salt of the earth." But our scripture today is a little more obfuscated. It's like there's a fog between us and Jesus' words. In this case the fog is the fog of time, place, and culture. If you're driving in the fog, you know, you have to use your low-beams to see better. If you use your high-beams, your own headlights bounce back in your face. So I invite you to click on your low-beams right now, and to really listen for the heart of Jesus' message that's lingering behind the fog. We return to the Sermon on the Mount, where we hear these words from Jesus... [Matthew 5:21-37]

"May God bless us with understanding. Amen."

I.

In my non-scientific observation of Ministers on FaceBook this week, I noticed that many preachers are avoiding the text we just read. They are stepping away from the Sermon on the Mount and preaching on the other lectionary scriptures this week, from Deuteronomy and 1 Corinthians. One clergyperson wrote, "It's kind of like the Sermon on the Mount is a many-course meal, and this week is a kind of palate cleanser. Like... well, like a sorbet." But we are not serving up a sorbet today. No, we came for the Sermon on the Mount, and I am determined, and I hope you're with me, to not avoid this part of it just because it's challenging to us. We need to hear from Jesus about anger. We need it because in our time and place, there's a growing, palpable sense that injustice is winning, and with every unfolding news story, there's this fresh underground rage. Do you feel it too? Like a slowly boiling fury just under the surface. What do we even do with a feeling like that?

II.

Growing up in the South as a young white woman, the cultural messages I got around anger were to always be polite, to avoid conflict-- and to say what you "really" think behind closed doors to people you trust (not to speak directly with the person you have a problem with). This basically means resorting to gossip, which is not okay. And I suspect that using gossip as "cover" to avoid conflict is not just a Southern thing, y'all. This week I spoke with someone who grew up learning that it's not okay to feel angry-- that girls and young women are taught to feel "sad" or "disappointed," but never "angry." Maybe this is your experience? I wonder what messages you got about anger, growing up? Many people are taught to hold anger inside. After movie producer and sexual predator Harvey Weinstein was arrested, the actress Uma Thurman was interviewed on the red carpet. She was asked

about her thoughts on Harvey Weinstein, and she said, "I'm waiting to make a statement when I'm less angry." People are often taught to "stuff" their anger. Especially women, and really especially, African American women. Michelle Obama, in her book *Becoming*, writes about being plagued by the "angry black woman 'trap.'" She writes, "I was female, black and strong, which to certain people... translated only to 'angry.' It was another damaging cliché, one that's been forever used to sweep minority women to the perimeter of every room.... I was now starting to actually feel a bit angry, which then made me feel worse, as if I were fulfilling some prophecy laid out for me by the haters." Michelle Obama is right-- we have plenty of examples of the consequences of African American women who show their anger. In 2009 Serena Williams was fined \$80,000 for an angry outburst, in 2018 she was fined an additional \$17,000 plus the loss of the Women's Open-- after the chair umpire accused her of cheating, then docked her a point when she spoke angrily to him about the call. Later in the same game she broke her racket in anger-- something many white male tennis players had done before her, without consequence-- and it cost her the game. But even faced with an unfair outcome, she stopped a boo-ing crowd, turned to her opponent, and shook her hand to congratulate her. In Michelle Obama's words, when the umpire went low, in the end, Serena Williams went high. In these examples, we see both the lameness of "stuffing" anger, and also the danger or risk of expressing anger, especially for minority women. When we're always thinking about how we're being perceived, or facing the repercussions of showing anger, it wastes all our energy. How are we supposed to speak out when we're busy wondering what other people will think of us, and what our anger might cost us?

And before we go further, I want to acknowledge the reality that anger can also be destructive and abusive, and that there are plenty of examples of that both in our culture, and also in our Bible. Unchecked anger can lead to violence that harms people physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And this is where the stereotype about male anger and aggression comes in. People who identify as male sometimes are socialized to express underlying emotions (emotions like grief and fear) as anger-- and then to use that anger to control a situation (or a person). I dare say that's not healthy for anyone either. So with all these stereotypes and unwritten cultural rules, how can we cultivate anger in more constructive ways? And how can our scripture today offer some guidance on all this?

III.

In today's passage about anger, adultery, divorce, and swearing oaths, Jesus unpacks what "following the spirit of the law" could look like for the community gathered before him. Last week we read the section of the Sermon on the Mount just before this, where Jesus says, don't be like the Pharisees who follow the letter of the law, but not the spirit of the law. When you put that with today's reading, the implication seems to be that the Pharisees-- well, they might not murder anyone, but they still bring their offerings to the altar with plenty of anger in their hearts. They might not commit adultery, but they still lust around or have an emotional affair or more quietly turn their hearts & attentions away from their

partner. They might leave their wives, but not legally change their status, which leaves the women unprotected and vulnerable. They might make big promises without being honest in their words. You get the idea-- Jesus is saying it matters how you act in your daily life, and it matters what's in your heart.

Jesus wants his community to put their hearts into their religious life. And putting your heart into it often is not easy-- but ultimately being real or authentic with people is necessary to build up a healthy spiritual community. When Jesus warns that hurling insults at a neighbor makes us liable to the fires of hell, he lays out the healthier path. (He's not serving up sorbet here.) Go and get right with the person you have a problem with. Be reconciled with them-- this will not be easy, but it's important not to walk around acting like you're not angry when really you are seething inside.

I talked to one of my psychologist friends this week, and she said that anger can be a sign that something is wrong. Anger is information. What can anger be telling us? A lot of professionals have studied anger, but I'd like to lift up just 2 kinds, the first is iceberg-anger. If you imagine an iceberg, you see the top part that's out of the water, and that is the expression of anger. But under the surface of the water, are all the other feelings that might be present: grief, powerlessness, fear, overwhelm, disgust, annoyance, hurt, regret, guilt, rejection, anxiety. Although anger is a valid emotion all on its own, it can be a clue that there might be one of these other feelings hiding underneath. So that's iceberg-anger. The second kind of anger I'd like to lift up is injustice-anger. This is the feeling of outrage we feel when we witness or experience injustice. The poet Maya Angelou said, "To be angry is very good. It burns out things and leaves nutrients in the soil. You should always be ready to be angry at injustice and cruelty." In other words, outrage at oppression is an entirely appropriate response.

In our current American context, some of us are afraid of having our rights taken away, some of us are angry at the injustice of cronyism, some of us grieve the loss of global relationships our country had fostered for so long, some of us are devastated by our government's choices to move backward on climate change, some of us are enraged by the prospects of Border-Patrol SWAT teams being sent to help ICE arrest immigrants in Sanctuary Cities. But whether we're experiencing iceberg-anger or injustice-anger, there are spiritual tools that can help keep us going when we feel angry. Here are a few:

- Taking our anger to God in prayer is always a good first step. It might look like this:  
"God, I am so angry right now. Show me what is underneath this anger. Guide my steps. Help me to know what you are calling out of me in this moment, because I am super triggered and I need your help to get clear on what to do next."
- Anger itself can be a spiritual tool, like an arrow pointing us toward something else. It can be important to listen to the anger and ask what deeper pain it's

pointing to, and whether the anger might fuel what needs to boil out of us, to reveal a deeper truth.

- Solidarity is a spiritual tool we can use with anger. Solidarity, standing with one who is vulnerable and oppressed, often means we have to be brave. I like Uma Thurman, but solidarity means being braver than she was on the red carpet-- because being in solidarity with people who are being harmed is more important than "stuffing" anger for propriety's sake. This is actually super important for people who have privilege to remember: solidarity.
- The spiritual tool of stepping back to see the bigger picture can bring healing when anger arises. Often anger is a symptom of a systemic problem-- and pausing to take a breath and wonder about the bigger picture can help.
- And of course, anything that you like to do that creates a sanctuary inside yourself is a spiritual tool you can use when you're furious: art, dance, music, yoga, prayer, coming to worship on Sundays. These inner rhythms can guide you. But the trick is to practice them when you aren't angry, so you can rely on them when you are. It helps to wind your spiritual clock every day, even in small ways.

#### IV.

Anger has a kind of blustery feeling to it. Have you noticed this too? It seems to act like a storm that thunders and lightnings, and then passes, and the sun comes out. Have you ever had that feeling of relief after releasing your anger? In 1973, a man who had lost faith in humanity wrote to E.B. White (the author of *Charlotte's Web*), asking for advice. E.B. White wrote a beautiful letter back to him, saying, "As long as there is one upright man, as long as there is one compassionate woman, the contagion may spread and the scene is not desolate. Hope is the thing that is left to us, in a bad time. I shall get up Sunday morning and wind the clock, as a contribution to order and steadfastness. Sailors have an expression about the weather: they say, the weather is a great bluffer. I guess the same is true of our human society--things can look dark, then a break shows in the clouds, and all is changed, sometimes rather suddenly. .... Hang on to your hat. Hang on to your hope. And wind the clock, for tomorrow is another day."

So today, let us remember to attend to our anger in ways that bring life to our community. Let us remember that healing is possible even in a society that fosters untruths. Let us remember to hold on to hope. Let us remember the spiritual practices that support us when we're enraged. Let us remember to wind our clock. Amen.

End notes:

"The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" by Audre Lorde

"I Used to Insist I Didn't Get Angry. Not Anymore" by Leslie Jamison

The Anger Iceberg. <[gottman.com](http://gottman.com)>