

## Anger often leads to sin, but not all anger is sinful

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3rd Sunday in Lent, Year B

The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Aptos, CA

The Reverend Tracy J. Wells Miller, Rector

The story of Jesus “cleansing the temple,” as today’s Gospel passage is often called, gives us a glimpse of a side of Jesus that can make us uncomfortable: his anger. Popular images of Jesus tend to picture him as quiet and serene, holding soft, fluffy lambs or cradling children, or sitting in a field of lilies. You don’t see many stained glass windows showing an image of Jesus chasing people and animals with a whip.

Why are we in the church so reluctant to acknowledge that Jesus got angry sometimes? Well, for one thing, we generally do not think of anger as a good thing. We associate anger with sin, and if we claim that Jesus lived among us as “one without sin,” then if anger is a sin, surely Jesus could never have ever gotten angry.

But anger in and of itself is *not* a sin! Anger is a natural human emotion, and to think it is possible not to feel anger as a human being is foolishness. A more realistic goal would be to learn how to acknowledge our anger and name it, so that we can control it rather than allowing it to control us.

The scriptures warn us in many places of the ways in which anger can lead to sin – for instance, Ecclesiastes 7:9 says, “Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for

anger resides in the lap of fools,” and Jesus warns in the Sermon on the Mount that it is not enough to simply refrain from killing, but nurturing anger against a brother or sister is also doing a kind of violence to them.

Matthew 5:21 says: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment” (Matthew 5:21).

But a key scriptural witness on anger is the instruction to the Christian community in Ephesians 4, verses 26-27: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.”

There is clearly a distinction here between anger and sin. Anger often leads to sin, but to be angry is not sinful. The instructions in Ephesians – “Be angry, but do not sin” and “do not let the sun go down on your anger” – encourage us not to “stuff” our anger, but to express it in healthy ways – so that we don’t wind up lashing out at others in ways that are destructive and harmful – *those* kinds of actions are the sin, not the anger itself.

In our Lenten study this coming Wednesday night, we’re going to be talking about exploring and becoming more aware of our emotions, particularly in light of the difficulties Christians often have in acknowledging and processing the “difficult emotions” of anger, sadness and fear. Because there are verses in the Bible that say we should be “slow to become angry, for man’s anger does

not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1:19-20), or that we should “be joyful always and give thanks in all circumstances,” (1 Thess. 5:16-18) or that “perfect love casts out all fear,” (1 John 4:18), it is easy to draw the mistaken conclusion that anger, sadness, and fear are signs of lack of faith or that “good Christians” don’t have or feel those emotions. But that is simply not true, and our attempts to pretend that it is so lead us down dangerous paths, where these unprocessed difficult emotions “leak” out and cause us to sin.

Anger is a God-given emotion that helps us to notice when something is wrong. If we can acknowledge our anger and name it, we can control it rather than allowing it to control us. Managed well, it can lead us to advocate for change, to say “enough is enough” to racial discrimination, to school shootings, to sexual harassment and sexual violence, to anything in our world that dehumanizes or commodifies our brothers and sisters, who are God’s precious creation. But managed poorly, it can lead to hurt feelings, alienation, distrust, division, violence and war.

So tread lightly when dealing with the powerful and potentially destructive emotion of anger. Remember that God has created each of us with free will, which means that we do have the ability to control our behavior, even when we feel angry. Will your anger lead you to work constructively for positive change or to tear others down and cause harm? The choice is entirely up to you.

