

“Anger”
August 2, 2020
St. Paul’s UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Isaiah 1:15-17

When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Ephesians 6:10-13

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

Welcome back to our summer preaching series, “Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith”! This summer, I’m preaching from a book that has influenced me so much over the last fifteen years or so – a book of the same name by Kathleen Norris.

In her book, Norris takes words like salvation, or incarnation, or idolatry – words that many of us may have heard all our lives if we were church goers – and begins to imagine these words in fresh, new ways.

...And that’s we are doing, too. Each week, I choose one of my favorite words from Norris’ book; each week, we explore together we might start to hear some of these words as if we, too, are hearing them for the first time.

Last week, we looked together at the word “idolatry.” At the beginning of her chapter on idolatry, Kathleen Norris writes: “idolatry makes love impossible.”¹ We looked together last week at what that might mean in the context of loving our God, our neighbor and ourselves, as we strive to love in balanced and holy ways – not idolizing others by putting them on pedestals (which hurts our neighbor), and not comparing ourselves to them (which hurts us).

That was last week. Today, we spend some time with the word “anger.”

¹ Norris, Kathleen, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, New York, 1998), p. 88.

Anger. Now there's a word that, if we do use it in church, it is often in the context of God's anger. But I have to admit that "anger" might actually be a word we tend to shy away from in church – especially when it has to do with our own anger. We are Christians, for goodness' sake! We're supposed to always be nice and loving, right? So who wants to admit that we are angry?

But as human beings, we do get angry. All of us: men, women, the whole gamut. And by not telling the truth about that, by not asking ourselves what our anger might be trying to tell us, we are doing ourselves, and our world, a huge disservice.

Go on Facebook, or a similar platform, and you'll see a lot of anger. Especially these days. I know you see it, too. So many of us talk past each other, get angry, write unkind and unloving things, un-friend each other. What does it all mean?

I see this a lot in our conversations about racial justice, which breaks my heart. Side note: I don't see a lot of this from you all, St. Paul's folk, and for that I am grateful. But this rage is all over so much of Facebook. I see it all the time.

I so wish we could engage more fully with one another on racial justice. I believe we are called to a higher place – yes, and that means hard conversations, and discomfort – we are called to a higher place; not to this anger (rage, really) that causes us to shut down and sever relationships.

When I see us raging, I wonder where it comes from.

As a White person, when I get angry, I think my rage comes from my sense of fragility, from not wanting to be uncomfortable, and from a deep sense of fear. When someone calls out the ways I continue to participate in white privilege – in all the ways where I get built up at the expense of my Black brothers and sisters – I don't like it. I'm afraid someone might see me as a bad person. But even more than that, I'm afraid I'll have to give up something. I'm afraid I might have to change, to start seeing the world through someone else's eyes, like imagining what it would be like to have Black sons or daughters and having to tell them to be so, so very careful out there. Of being afraid for their lives every minute of every day.

Yes, when I am angry, so much of my anger is really a deep-seated fear. And, along with Kathleen Norris, who writes this more beautifully than I ever could, "I find that I [am trusting] my anger much less. I am increasingly aware of its inconsistencies, its tendency to serve primarily as a mask for my fears."²

What about you, church? When do you find yourselves getting angry, even rageful? And what if you took some moments to be curious about that anger, that rage – to ask yourself, what is behind it? Why is the feeling so strong?

² *Ibid*, p. 126.

So that's one kind of anger, the kind we see on a platform like Facebook, the kind that causes us to see red and severe relationships with one another. It's an anger that is destructive – both to the people around us, and to ourselves.

But that is not the only kind of anger that exists. Have you ever heard of “righteous anger”? Now, that's a very different kind of anger. That's the kind of anger that God feels when God sees us acting in injustice towards one another. God articulates this kind of anger towards us in Isaiah 1:15: “When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.” In this passage from the prophet Isaiah, the anger of God speaks truth. As Kathleen Norris puts it, “No matter how ‘nice’ we think we are, or morally in the right, our hands, too, are full of blood.”³ We do not take care of the poor, we turn from the marginalized, we continue to participate in systems of oppression. And God weeps. And, yes, is angry. And this is a very different kind of anger from the rage I talked about earlier. This is *God's* righteous anger. This is God's holy anger towards us when we do not love one another the ways we are called to love.

But there is Good News, church! God offers us a remedy, a balm, a way out. The remaining verses of Isaiah read: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” A tall order, to be sure, and one we cannot accomplish alone. But that's why we have each other! You hear me say so much to you, “Thanks be to God we are not alone!” Well, this is what I mean. I can't do all this work – seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow – by myself. No way. But together? Together, I can hardly begin to imagine what we might be able to accomplish, to do, to set right, to confess, to change....

Anger is not “bad,” in and of itself. It completely depends on where the anger comes from. If the anger we feel is because we are afraid of change, or because we feel threatened – if it's an anger that causes us to shut down and shut out the voices that challenge us – it might be a good idea to take a good, hard look at that. What if we were to get curious about that anger, about where it comes from and what it is really telling us?

But church, not all anger is bad. We've seen how God's righteous anger is the kick in the pants we so often need to see all the injustice we participate in, the kick in the pants to confess, to turn around, to change our ways.

And church, I pray we have this kind of anger, too. This second kind – this righteous anger, this holy anger, that comes from God. The Apostle Paul writes, “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness.” I pray that we

³ *Ibid*, p. 125.

struggle, that we become angry, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness – seen particularly in systems of oppression like racism and our part in it. I know it's uncomfortable. Believe me. I'd rather just go along nicely and pretend like everything is fine. I don't want to feel anger, especially the righteous kind. Because then it means I have to move, to confess, to change, to do something. And that is scary.

But still. I still am praying for it, I am looking for it. And, I wonder what it would be like for God to give us the good gift of righteous anger.

Thanks be to God.