

My college friends love to tell the story of the first time they heard me speak up. I'm a pretty mild mannered, quiet person - most of you probably know that by now - and in college I was pretty shy, but one day we were hanging out in the dorm, 4 or 5 of us, including this one guy Steve. And Steve - who honestly had a reputation for being quite a jerk - started making fun of my friend, picking on her because of her struggles with mental health issues. He said something like, "you know, you'd be a lot more fun if you stopped acting so depressed all the time." Well, that was it, I was angry, I stood up, put my shoulders back, and said "Actually Steve, you'd be a lot more fun if your negative self-image and fragile ego didn't cause you to act like a jerk and pick on other people all the time." Mic Drop. The room was silent and everyone was slack-jawed - except for Steve who shut his mouth for once, and didn't open it again for the rest of the night.

Righteous Anger. You know, that's not one of the fruits of the Spirit. Instead, Paul encourages us to have patience, self control, to show kindness and in all things to live in a Spirit of love. So this may cause us to think that there's no place for anger in the Christian Life. Some of us were taught from an early age that kindness and anger could not coexist. That anger should be subsumed under the greater moral good of politeness. And yet anger is a natural human emotion. God created us to get angry at times.

The letter to the Ephesians is meant to provide all Christians (not just the ancients and not just those in Ephesus) with guidance about how to live now that they are following the Way of Christ. Christians are called to be imitators of God. Ephesians 4 tells us, "Be angry, but do not sin." Be angry. We know there are times when God gets angry. And times too when even Jesus, the Prince of Peace, gets angry. But it's not a willy-nilly anger, or an anger rooted in ego. God's anger comes like the anger parents know all too well, an anger rooted in wanting to protect one's children, an anger rooted in frustration when the path of possibility is clear and we, in our foolishness, choose fear, or self-centeredness, or fail to live into our best selves. And Christ's anger, the most clear example of which comes when he flips the money-changers' tables in the temple, comes in response to injustice - when humankind exploits the weak, props up systems that oppress and demean, when God's beloved are given no dignity and denied help and healing.

Yes, if we are called to be imitators of God, and followers of Jesus, we are called to get angry when humankind chooses to turn away from what's right. It should enrage us when we witness oppression, and poverty, and violence, when people and systems deny the inherent worth of others, when fairness is forgotten and hope is stamped out.

But - the words of Ephesians continue - But - do not sin. Yes, anger can be an appropriate response in today's world, but it can be oh so dangerous too. Do not let your anger grow so powerful that it causes you to sin, to turn away from God. It can be tempting at times - there is a lot to be angry about. The world is not a fair place for many. Too often justice is denied or deferred so far down the road that it seems a hollow promise. Perhaps you're feeling angry about this Delta Variant and how our season of pandemic seems to stretch on and on with more suffering, more disappointment, more devastation wrought each day. I am angry. It is good and right to be angry. But - do not sin. Rail against God if you must. Yell at the TV, point fingers, have a good cry. But don't let the sun go down on your anger.

At the end of day remember that we are called, not to throw up our hands and turn away from God, or from our calling to be imitators of God, Christians following the path of Jesus. Instead we must remember what God does in God's anger. When the precious one, the embodiment of love, God's beloved incarnate son is murdered at the hands of the mob, at the direction of the state, as even the apostles stood by - God responds not with wrath, but with grace. With a grace that extends to include all those who act foolishly against their own self interest, with a grace that covers all who whose fear gets the better of them, with a grace that promises a new tomorrow when the day ends in tragedy, with a grace that continues to affirm the blessedness of all creation and offers another chance in the morning.

We too are called to hope in tomorrow. We are called to feel anger, but to never worship that anger in place of a God who - at the end of the day - offers forgiveness and grace and possibility. We are called to feel anger, and to trust that anger may even lead to good, to empowerment and bravery and transformation. But we cannot give that anger room to lodge overnight, room to take up permanent residence in our hearts in such a way that we lose sight of the blessedness of life and the lives of others.

How might we, who stand in the shadows of our anger, use that anger to enhance the humanity of another? What would that look like for you or for me? Whose humanity can we uplift, support, and bless this week? What anger, in us, needs to be better channeled, better understood, or diffused for the sake of our own well-being or the well-being of others? Holy God, in this week to come help us to be angry, but not to sin, and to use our holy anger in ways that serve your ways of justice, peace, grace and the blessedness of all creation. Amen.