

On Anger

Luke 4:14–30

This is a topical sermon, meaning I wish to springboard from the Gospel reading to consider the subject of anger. To begin, a poem from Wendell Berry:

*I love the courage
of the little black ants
who when disturbed
come out of their old
fencepost as big dogs
come after a rat,
take hold of me,
shake me, and growl.*

I want to reflect first on the Letter to the Ephesians, specifically the fourth chapter. It begins with the idea of unity: as Christians, we have “one hope” because of our “one faith, one Lord, and one baptism.” Therefore, we must do all we can to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace” (Eph. 4:3–4). However, a desire for unity leads to disagreements, even conflicts, and so we should “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15).

Then, the verse that draws my attention this morning: “Be angry, yet do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” (Eph. 4:26). Perhaps you are familiar with this idea of not going to sleep angry; it’s good advice for marriage, parenting, and many other relationships. Yet, notice that the verse does not say “if you are angry,” but rather “be angry.” The verse acknowledges and even commends anger. Be angry.

I’m quick to add that there are different kinds of anger. The anger of the crowd that led them to try and throw Jesus off a cliff is obviously negative, and anger does not justify violence, whether physical, verbal, or emotional abuse.

Anger is a surface or secondary emotion, meaning that other feelings lie deeper in us or are primary for us. Anger, then, can be a teacher if we are curious about it.

Hebrews 4:15 reads that Jesus was like us in every way except without sin. Jesus might model healthy anger for us. Indeed, he was often mad! There is the famous scene in the Temple when he overturned the moneychangers’ tables and drove them out. More often, Jesus expressed his anger in conversation. He was in conflict with the religious leaders, decrying the hypocrisy, for example, of justifying the

lack of assistance for those in need by claiming to follow the sabbath. These rabbis and teachers were members of his own faith community and religious tradition. Jesus was most enraged with his closest followers. He roared at Peter, his disciple, “Get behind me, Satan!”

So, it is perhaps not surprising that Jesus was angry with his hometown congregation. But why? What was beneath and behind Jesus’ anger?

According to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, compassion for others is the foundation of righteous anger.¹ Notice that “passion” can look like anger. Jesus announced in Nazareth that his mission was to free the captives, release the parishioners, and give justice to the oppressed. Therefore, he became enraged at the powers and individuals responsible for creating such unjust conditions.

What’s more, Jesus’ vision was expansive and inclusive. He had good news not only for Israel but for the world. This implied that God’s grace was boundless. While this sounds good in theory, grace is scandalous for those who consider themselves first. This appears to be the mindset of the crowd in Nazareth, and so Jesus angrily cites examples in Jewish history of grace given to the outsider, the marginalized, and even the enemy.

Jesus models righteous anger, which means, first, we are called to root our feelings in compassion for the vulnerable in our society—the “least of these” (Matt. 25) that Jesus commanded us to care for—and, second, we are asked to work through our anger. It is easy, even with a desire for righteousness, to become self-righteous.

Here is the wisdom of Ephesians: “Be angry, but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” Acknowledge your anger, then seek to channel it. Anger alone will not fuel the peacemaking and justice movement that Jesus calls for. Compassion and love serve as its foundation.

Yesterday, I gathered with a group in front of the Chatham County Justice Center in Pittsboro. I could feel the anger from the crowd even from a distance. There were posters expressing solidarity for transgender people and immigrant rights. I share these commitments not as a political position but as a faith statement.

In addition, I felt my own anger that the financial freeze of international funds was crippling life-saving healthcare for some of the poorest people in the world, including children. And this is the name of being pro-life!

¹ See Tutu’s book with the Dalai Lama, *The Book of Joy*

Yesterday in Pittsboro, the first shared about her loving relationship to a woman and how difficult it had been to raise their children before their marriage was legal; another man spoke of his father, a Black pastor in Raleigh during the 1960s and the struggle for Civil Rights. While anger was a motivating factor for these people to speak, their words were rooted in compassion for the vulnerable. Something changed in the crowd. Fists and jaws unclenched; by the end, there were smiles, handshakes, and hugs.

Wendell Berry wrote about those little black ants. There is anger. And fear. I know that many of you feel both. It can seem overwhelming, especially when we feel so small. Anger, then, might cause us to gather, yet it is love that will carry us forward. It's the courage of those ants that Berry lauds.

I want to end on the peculiar way that the Gospel reading concludes. The enraged crowd pushed Jesus to the edge of a cliff, yet "Jesus walked right through the crowd and went on his way." (Luke 4:30). There's actually nothing magical about this description. It's not like Jesus vanished into thin air (like Dobby of *Harry Potter*). I think of the courage he modeled as reflected in the "Little Rock Nine," the Black teenagers who broke the segregation of schools in 1957. They faced a crowd of perhaps a thousand angry white folks, jeering, spitting, and throwing rotten food at them. They passed right through them. What courage. Amen.

Andrew Taylor-Troutman

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