

Sermon:“Temper Tantrums and Righteous Rage”
Rev. Martha Hodges March 14, 2010

We’ve talked about pride, and envy. In this series of sermons on the Seven Deadly Sins, we’ve covered these, along with lust and gluttony and greed. We’ll get to sloth next month. These six are “sins” that we can talk about pretty easily. They seem almost quaint, really. If you’re prideful, or envious or avaricious, well, these are just part of modern life. In some ways, they are constructive. At the very least, they make the wheels of modern commerce turn. As for lust, gluttony and sloth, these are, for the most part, private excesses that we can tolerate, or even look on with humor, or a mild “tsk tsk.”

Wrath, on the other hand – now we’re getting to some scary stuff. Wrath, the uncontrolled or inordinate expression of anger, especially vengeful anger, is the stuff that destroys not just individual quality of life, but relationships, families and nations. Wrath is harder to talk about, and harder to think about.

We all experience it, after all. From infancy on, anger is normal and healthy. This is what we tell our children. We all know that it’s not good to deny it; that anger that is chronically suppressed is likely to make itself known eventually, in physical symptoms like high blood pressure, or in explosive acts of rage. Anger is our evolutionary response to threats to our safety. It’s a warning to aggressors. It allows us to defend ourselves.

So if we’re all so reasonable when it comes to understanding anger, why are we so bad at living with it? Why does our own anger so often end in remorse and even shame?

Anger, of all the so-called deadly sins, most directly affects other people, usually in harmful or at least hurtful ways. We don’t want to think of ourselves as mean, angry, hurtful people. We want to be kind, patient, understanding. We want to be in control of ourselves. We want to be rational and constructive. Anger, especially in its more extreme forms, reduces us to snarling beasts – or so we fear. We fear what we may be capable of saying and doing when the beast is unleashed. Yes, wrath is scary stuff.

Wrath is scary because of the destruction we secretly suspect we may be capable of wrecking on others and on the manageability and relative peacefulness of our own lives. It’s scary because we have all been the unwilling recipients of anger. As children, we have probably all felt the power of the angry parent. Even moderate correction from a wise and gentle parent may be perceived as threatening to the child, so dependent, so powerless. And what of the parent who is given to rages, the unpredictable, out of control or chronically angry parent? It’s a safe bet that the child of such a parent will have, as they say, anger issues.

I’ve certainly found this to be true of myself. I’m not very good at anger. Other people’s or my own. When I witness a stranger who is out of control, especially if they are violent or threatening, my heart races, I get shaky and want to run away. People yelling at each other in public send me into full fight or flight reaction – preferably flight.

Anger is scary because our ability to reason tends to shut down as the adrenaline pumps through our systems. It's nearly impossible to really hear what the other person is saying when we feel we are under attack. Our own statements become strategic rather than truthful or compassionate.

This has become clear to me in a very personal way during arguments with people I love or whose approval I want. The first round of the argument goes something like this: First, there's the shock of realizing that the other is attacking you – or that you are attacking him. There's a moment of inner stillness. Then the rush begins. The stomach tightens, the pulse quickens. You enter into full fight mode, cold or hot, depending on your personal style. You parry. Accuse and defend, blame and defend. Your words become weapons. At a certain point, you both agree, usually tacitly, to withdraw. You examine your wounds and prepare for round two. Or else... or else you lay down your sword and shield. You go back to the battlefield unarmed. Your fist unclenches. You speak from the heart. You experience a flood of relief. You admit to your hurts, your fears. You listen. You apologize. And you start to communicate, to speak the truth.

You can't communicate when you're defending yourself, you can only defend, even if you appear to be responding calmly and rationally. Truth is one of the casualties of wrath. Trust is another. Communication can't happen without these. Violence is the outcome in the most extreme cases. Alienation from people we care about, more typically. And disgust and remorse and shame. Alienation from the person we want to be. No wonder anger in all its various forms is so hard to face in ourselves.

Sometimes anger is just what it seems – anger. When you or someone else has been treated unfairly, you get mad. This is righteous anger. It is a powerful tool. It is the engine that drives social reform. It is energizing and motivating. In the heat of passion, it can be used to justify all kinds of discrimination and scapegoating and vengeance. It can be employed to justify wars. Used wisely and deliberately, it is what makes us crave justice and work for it in peaceful ways.

But anger is less often the legitimate response to injustice than the mask for other, more painful feelings. Feelings like fear and helplessness; frustration and powerlessness; sadness and rejection; shame; disappointment, jealousy, guilt and inadequacy. Who wouldn't rather work up a good head of righteous steam or self-righteous anger than to feel any of these? Feelings that leave us vulnerable? Feelings that reveal that we are imperfect, needy and quite possibly in the wrong?

If we could step back from the fight, breathe, calm ourselves, we might allow ourselves to feel what lies underneath all this anger. How different the world would be if we could do this! If instead of accusing and blaming and labeling, we could say, "I'm afraid you'll leave me." Or "I was embarrassed." Or "I feel unappreciated." Or "I'm ashamed of what I did." Or "I worry that I'm not smart enough... not talented enough... not attractive enough."

Sadly, this isn't the world we live in. Such vulnerability is likely to make people uncomfortable at best. At worst, it encourages them to take advantage of us or gives them further justification for their own failings. Sometimes, with the right person, at the right moment, the other will meet us half way. And if they don't? If they don't, we will still know that we've given peace and truth our best shot. In those cases, acknowledging our secrets to ourselves, at least, has its own healing properties.

I've had this experience, and perhaps you have, too. I had a professor that I was just at loggerheads with the whole semester. I was pretty sure I was being treated unfairly and I reacted by being challenging and skeptical in class. About a year later, when I'd had time to think about it and regret my hostile attitude, I went to see her. I told her I thought I had missed out on all she had to offer and I apologized for having been defensive. She, to my amazement, told me that she didn't want to or have to talk to me and basically kicked me out of her office. So this strategy doesn't necessarily work out. But I felt a lot better. I knew I'd done the honorable thing, but more importantly, I'd stopped feeling angry at her. I was able to see that she had her own fears and problems. I was no longer powerless, no longer the victim, and so no longer needed to be angry, at her or at myself.

Anger at yourself is at least as dangerous as anger directed toward another. Turned inward, anger can give you a salutary kick in the pants. It can motivate you to change your behavior. But if self-accusation is chronic, a way of life -- if you're mad at yourself not just for a particular episode but because of who you are, then, chances are, you're depressed. And as with other forms of anger, this can become aggressive, even violent. It can lead to abusing drugs or alcohol, abusing food or sex or taking dangerous risks in order to dull the pain. It can lead to suicide. This kind of anger, this kind of self-hatred demands medical help. But after the anti-depressant or the mood stabilizing medication kicks in, it will still be necessary to look deeply into the anger, just as in the case of anger directed outward.

What are the fears and frustrations, the hurts and feelings of inadequacy that cause you or me to beat up on ourselves and where do they come from? What pain is this anger masking? These are questions for you to find the answers to with the support of a skilled counselor.

This anger, as with any anger, again, is scary stuff. Its power to do damage is real. And like any kind of anger, from annoyance to rage, it can be useful and it can be worked with to yield understanding and compassion. What are the triggers to your anger and why do those particular situations set you off? In my case, nothing sets my teeth on edge more than being condescended to, controlled or bossed around. It doesn't take a psychologist to figure out why someone who grew up with two older and extremely competent sisters might feel this way.

So after I've taken several deep breaths and splashed a bit of cold water on my face, maybe taken a nap or written in my journal, then what? Yelling and stamping my foot isn't going to make me feel like the competent adult I want to be. How am I to deal

with the desire to throw a tantrum when someone talks down to me or tells me how to live my life?

If I'm smart – and I'm not saying I always am – I tell the other person what's bothering me and why. I describe what happened: "You told me that I should manage my money like a responsible adult." I state how I feel about this: "I feel disrespected and that you think I'm less capable than you." I request a different behavior and explain how that would benefit us both: "If you have a suggestion, I'd like you to ask me if I'd like to hear it instead of telling me what I ought to do. That way, I'll be more open to hearing what you have to say." That's the way it's supposed to work, in theory. As I say, I'm not always so smart about problem solving when it comes to anger.

As with the other deadly sins we've talked about, wrath has a spiritual component as well as psychological, ethical and social aspects. This business of "sin" is many-faceted. It's a far cry from the simple command of the church fathers, "Don't do this, or else."

The spiritual opportunity when confronted by our own or another's anger is to resist alienation. Anger management is a practical approach to a deeply spiritual problem. Will we practice compassion in our lives, according it even to – or especially to – those who are most adept at pushing our buttons? Will we cultivate the practice of peace? Do we have the courage to know ourselves and allow ourselves to be known? Will we work to communicate our vulnerability, trusting in the goodness of those we care about?

Will we recognize that it is, finally, not all about us? That we share our lives with others, wounded as are we, striving to be good, as are we, reaching out and yearning for connection, as are we, and failing and trying again, as do we? Do we have the spiritual fortitude to practice patience, and forgiveness?

With trust in the generosity of others, may we learn to be generous. With gratitude for the many times we have been forgiven, may we forgive others. As we wish to be heard, may we hear others. With love for one another, may we learn to love ourselves.