

The Courage to Forgive: To Own Our Anger

Deuteronomy 32: 18-22: Ephesians 4: 25-32

Rev. Dean Snyder

I was feeling miserable.... just awful... as though a forty -pound anvil were setting on my heart inside of my chest. I did all the usual things I do when I am feeling bad. I called and I talked to friends. I took a long, long walk and nothing seemed to help.

So finally I called a psychiatrist friend, and I said to him, "I'm feeling bad and I can't figure out why."

He asked me to tell him a little of what was going on in my life. And I did. He said,"Oh, this is easy. You are angry."

"I don't think so," I said. "I don't feel like I am angry."

He said. "This is a problem that you religious types often have. You are angry and you don't want to admit even to yourself that you are angry. And so instead you direct the anger inward and feel miserable."

There was a long pause in our conversation and I said," I don't think I am angry."

He said, "From little bit you told me on the phone, I don't even know the person that you are involved with and I want to wring his neck. How can you not be angry?"

"But this is someone I like," I said. "I like this person."

“Well,” my psychiatrist friend said, “Do you suppose that you can’t be angry at someone you like?”

“Oh,” I said.

I want to talk for several Sundays about forgiveness. Professor Kortwright Davis says that the church ought to be first and foremost in the forgiveness business. What we ought to be about as a church, he says, is the business of forgiveness. It is our product.

In theory the way it ought to work is that we as a church, as God’s people, come into God’s presence and we experience God’s forgiveness for our failure, shortcomings and sins. That happens when people do not forgive each other and instead seek vengeance and retribution. And then as a forgiven people we go into the world with an increased capacity to forgive others, so that we help manage to break the cycle of hurt and violence to the theory. Theories however are easier said than done.

What I want to explore over the next several Sundays into October is this theory of forgiveness. And I want to start out this morning by talking about anger. By talking about hurt and anger.

This may seem like an obvious thing to you, but it is something I bump my head and spirit against all of the time: It is almost impossible to get to the place of forgiveness if we are not able to acknowledge and recognize and face and own our hurt and our anger.

If we cannot admit to ourselves that we are angry, it is almost impossible for us to get to the place where we can set it down and let go of it and move into forgiveness and renew a relationship.

We can deny even to ourselves our own anger when it happens. My psychiatrist friend pointed out sometimes it is harder for we who seek to be Christians to face our anger because we think somehow that we must be loving and nice and gentle and kind all of the time so w

I would like us this morning to pay particular attention to what the Book of Ephesians says. The writer of Ephesians says, “So then putting away falsehood; let us speak the truth to our neighbors for we are members of one another. Be angry, but do not sin. (Ephesians 4:25-26c)

Apparently, anger is a part of meaningful human relationships. To be members of one another, to belong to one another, to have a real relationship means that we will inevitably experience anger.

I am tempted sometimes to think that if someone is angry at me it means that he or she does not like or love me. But that is not the case. We can be angry with people we like and we love and sometimes we become even more angry with people who we like and we love because those are the relationships that are the most meaningful to us, the relationships in which we have the most invested ourselves and the relationships in which we have made ourselves vulnerable. These are the relationships in which we are most easily hurt and pained.

In meaningful relationships, anger is part of the package. But if we can't let ourselves feel or experience, or acknowledge our anger it is going to be almost impossible for us to move past the anger to forgiveness. The anger will come out in one way or another, and usually in a way that is beneath the surface and often in a way that is particularly mean and hurtful.

Anger that we have not faced and owned we cannot control. It drives us rather than us being able to direct it. If you have got to choose between one or the other it is much better to have someone angry who is angry at you yell at you than to smile at you. Because if they smile at you, the great possibility is that the anger is going to come out in some other way.

This is why sweet people are sometimes a little scary. There are really are people who have, by nature and grace, the gift of sweetness. And there are people who have arrived at a place of such profound spiritual maturity they can forgive almost instantly and be nice and sweet. But there are others of us, who have not reached that level of spiritual maturity, but we think we ought to be sweet and we try to be sweet, but underneath our sweetness there is a pool of hurt and anger that we never quite manage to own or resolve.

So Ephesians is very interesting. Be angry because anger is part of meaningful relationships, but do not sin. I have had to learn that when I feel bad inside and nothing else seems to help it may be that I am angry. And if I can face and own and admit my anger then I can live in such a way that I can control my anger so that I do not hurt other people. When my anger is unrecognized and unacknowledged and I do not take responsibility, for it I will probably sin.

It seems to me that politics in America has become very angry. I am afraid that we do not recognize as a people how angry we are. And as a result our anger is coming out in hurtful and particularly divisive ways.

I have been upset for a number of years by the attack against our friend, Max Cleland, who left three limbs in Viet Nam. During his last campaign in Georgia he experienced ads which suggested that he was un-American. It was an angry campaign.

I have been upset about the Swift Boat Veteran's ads. These are angry ads. And I wonder if those who are making them and conducting those kinds of campaigns realize just how angry they are.

In one of his columns this week in *The Washington Post* A. J. Dionne mentioned an exchange between now President Bush and Senator John McCain when they were debating during the 2000 primaries. Dionne writes that when he ran against Bush four years ago McCain was smeared mercilessly. When McCain protested to Bush about the attacks at one of their debates, Bush brushed him off. "John," Bush said, "it's politics." McCain snapped back, "George, everything isn't politics."

I wonder if some of our leader realize how angry they are and how this anger has infiltrated our politics. And to be fair, I have to say that I would not be surprised if those who love President Bush are hurt and angry.

There has been a fierce edge to the way the president has been mocked and made fun of. *The New York Times* last Sunday suggested that political humor directed at President Bush had crossed the line and become mean. I like political humor as much as any one, but I have decided not to laugh at "dumb president" jokes anymore.

Whatever else we might say about this administration, President Bush has the admiration and respect of something like 50% of the voting population of this country. Be angry, if you are angry, about policies and about programs. Be angry, if you are angry, about war. Argue and debate and organize in an honest and direct way. But I suspect that the personal insults and attacks on the president's intelligence are not helping America at this point in history.

I wonder if we are aware of how angry we are, and in what kind of hurtful ways our anger is being manifest.

There is a lot of anger in the church, in our denominations these days. There is a reason for anger. I wonder if we realize just how angry we are sometimes in the United Methodist Church, and how our anger can come out in personal attacks as opposed to disagreements about the ways the United Methodist Church has been and is wrong.

Anger that is not faced and owned becomes destructive. It is the reason that we need to know that we are angry, and admit our anger to ourselves.

One of the reasons we ought to be able to face our anger is because of the story that we come here to church to tell each other week after week. This story says that God created humanity and humanity from the very beginning was in rebellion. And our rebellion made God angry, and God destroyed all of humanity except for one family in a great flood. Then God decided not to do that again and gave us ten simple norms, ten rules, to live our lives by. Instead of following those commandments we lived violently, selfishly and destructively toward one another.

God sent prophets to scold us and to call us back into right living. We stoned and killed God's prophets. And then according to this story, God who we disobeyed and who was rightfully angry (on a cross at Calvary) decided to give up God's own righteousness and to become sin with us. God decided to stop insisting on God's own righteousness and to become one with us, and out of this decision a new life emerged.

As a matter of fact, the Apostle Paul says in II Corinthians out of that this decision was born a whole new creation, a whole new beginning to everything (I Corinthians 5:17) This is a story we tell: that God chose to give up insisting on being right in order to instead be in a relationship with us, to be in love with us.

Anger can either drive us apart and cause us to destroy one another or anger at the cross on Calvary can bring us into even more profound and deeper relationships.

I heard of a marriage counselor who met with couples and encouraged them to complain about each other. Encouraged the husband to come out with every complaint that he could come up with about the wife. And he encouraged the wife to come up with every complaint she could about the husband. After they had complained as long and as loud as they could the marriage counselor met with them separately. He met with the husband and said, "Well, what you say about your wife is right. You are right. Now you have to decide whether you want to be right or to be married." And then he would meet with the wife and tell her the same thing. "Everything you say about your husband is right, but now you have to decide whether you want to be right or to be to be married."

At the cross of Calvary, according to this story we tell, God decided to give up being right in order to be in relationship with us, to be married to us, in the confidence that love lived out would eventually produce justice.

Our anger denied will drive us apart. Our anger owned and faced will take us to the cross of Calvary. Where we can choose to love each other even more profoundly rather than to cling to being right.

I got an email from Roseanne Stellar this week. Roseanne Stellar grew up at Foundry. She learned everything there was to learn in Sunday school, learned everything there was to learn from Ned Bachman and our other youth leaders. She did the Appalachian Service Project year after year eventually became one of the counselors for the Appalachian Service Project.

Roseanne developed a deep passion for justice, a deep burning passion for justice. This week she emailed me to tell me in the last two months in her new work she has she has registered over 5,000 new voters, young adults in Columbus, Ohio.

Our anger can destroy us or our anger can take us more deeply into love, into relationship, into community.