

Sermon: Anger Issues
Scripture: Isaiah and Ephesians 4
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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We continue our consideration of the 7 Deadly Sins as a tool to examine ourselves during this season of Lent so that we might recognize, as Augustine put it, how we have “curved in on ourselves” so we can take steps to turn back outward to God and one another. One of the inherent qualities of sin is how it can be unrecognizable to the sinner. We are likely blind to much of our sinfulness until we really are willing to look carefully and closely. And that’s our work for Lent. As I said last week, we’ve got to be careful about two things - at least - in considering the deadly sins – that we are training our interior eye upon ourselves and not others in this process. And Secondly, we recognize that many of us have been hurt by the church of our childhood being too heavy handed with the language of sin – shame on you, you sinners! - such that many have chosen to come to liberal Protestant churches to experience a gentler Christian approach. But one of our goals here during this penitential season of Lent is to reclaim the baby that maybe we’ve too readily thrown out with the bathwater. We want this series to be a nonthreatening invitation back to an awareness of the inherent value in considering our sinfulness so we might course correct in small or large ways towards more faithful and better living... cause who of us doesn’t want that for ourselves?!

So that’s why last week we considered the sins of gluttony and greed – and we figured those out, haha! - and this week we are considering the deadly sin of ANGER. There was an image that

accompanied the study of the 7 deadly sins that was used in the Middle Ages and which I imagine the poet William Blake was referencing when he wrote the powerful poem that our choir just sang. That was the image of a tree. As it's been understood, PRIDE is the deadliest sin among the 7 and gives rise to all the others. So in this image the trunk of the tree is Pride and then there are seven main branches that emerge out from the trunk – greed, gluttony, lust, envy, anger, sloth, and vainglory (a particular form of pride). Then off of each one of those branches comes multiple smaller branches of sins that then in the end bear poison fruit. So for instance, to review from last week – pride would be the trunk, greed would be a main branch which then has multiple little branching sins of deception, thievery, backstabbing, etc... which then produces the poison fruit of let's say ruined relationship. In the choir's anthem Pride was the trunk, anger the branch, suppressing and not sharing the anger an off-shoot branch and murder was the poisonous fruit. So for those of you who are more visually oriented, the image of the tree is one to hang onto while we consider these sins.

When the list was developed of the 7 Deadly Sins by the desert fathers and mother in the 4th and 5th centuries, they understood that these sins were “desires for good, which when pursued wrongly or excessively produce much other sin.” Just as eating is not a sin but necessary for our survival as well as enjoyment and social connections, gluttony twists that good in on oneself, so too is anger a natural emotion that can be an impetus for good but can quite easily go off-the-rails and separate us from our truest selves, from God and from our neighbor... remembering Paul Tillich's simple and effective definition of sin as separation.

In our scripture we have an expression from the Prophet Isaiah of God's righteous or holy anger, from Paul's letter to the Ephesians a warning against human unhealthy anger, and from the choir's anthem an example of unhealthy or destructive anger – anger that is suppressed and boils over in murderous violence. We also know from reading our New Testament and the life of Jesus that anger is not always sin because we see that our sinless savior, the incarnation of God, like God Godself in the Old Testament, was at times very angry.

In the passage from the Prophet Isaiah, we are given the fundamental reason for anger – injustice. God's anger throughout the Old Testament mostly comes back to Israel being 1. unfaithful in their covenantal promises and 2. unjust to others. That's what makes God so mad! God says angrily to Israel, "don't give me your burnt offerings and sacrifices, don't give me your festivals and offerings, don't lift up your prayers to me... what I want from you is to do what is right and seek justice, to defend the oppressed, take up the cause of the fatherless, defend the widow." What makes Jesus angry according to the New Testament is not that people are sinners in general - in fact the worst sinners of the day were those that Jesus would often chill with - but rather when religious leaders were self-righteous, when the marginalized were mistreated, when the powerless and poor were taken advantage of by the privileged. That is where Jesus' ire is ignited at such injustice and that's what we might call holy or healthy anger, anger rightly experienced, when it is in response to injustice done to ourselves or another.

But anger, as most all of us know, can very quickly cross the line from healthy to unhealthy, from constructive to destructive. Here I'm

going to quote again from the book “Glittering Vices” by Rebecca DeYoung which of all the resources I’ve dug into in this study, her’s is by far the richest!.. She’s an Associate Professor at Calvin College who teaches a course on the 7 Deadly Sins and she says “anger becomes sinful when it so disturbs reason that it twists any real concern about sin or injustice into service of the self, protecting our own egos, demanding something from the world that we wouldn’t reasonably expect for anyone else.” p. 119 She explains that our anger results from excessive expectations of what we deserve and an excessive sense of the sort of treatment we are due. The American Psychology Association says quite simply in their literature that highly angry people believe they deserve to have things go their own way. And maybe that shouldn’t be dismissed as “those highly angry people” but could be referring to any one of us. I don’t know about you, but I feel that indictment against myself, that often when I get angry I can probably and honestly trace that back to some excessive expectations of what I think I deserve. Thomas Aquinas in writing about anger argues that one of the offsprings of unholy anger is that it magnifies our own importance and the gravity of the offense.

One confessional example from my own life. We just had a small addition put on our house and we are thrilled with the outcome. But it took a long long time for our contractor to accomplish it. I had to manage my anger at times with being displaced to the basement of our house during all that time. Some days I managed my grumpiness better than others. But in the middle of it, as another week went by with our contractor getting very little done I watched myself magnify my own importance and even fantasize about how the contractor was probably

doing it just to make me mad! I knew rationally that wasn't the case and that he was doing his best with his various projects that he had to make his living, but there were moments when I banged my head once again on a basement beam as I got up in the night to go to the bathroom where I felt down-right murderous! "I deserve to have that addition that we paid for and have it in a reasonable time!"

Do you Will? Does the world owe you that? Is the contractor really wanting your unhappiness? Is this truly an injustice that your house addition is not being done quickly enough? You know Jesus' statement that it's harder for a rich man to get into heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle? I wonder if this isn't the heart of it? Could it be the case that those of us of wealth have a harder time accessing heaven in the re here and now or beyond because we basically believe we deserve it – you better let me in. This is where we see clearly the trunk of the tree – PRIDE - out of which the branch of anger emerges. Unhealthy anger, Aquinas says, magnifies our own importance and magnifies the gravity of the offense.

Rebecca DeYoung outlines Aquinas' explanation for how anger becomes disordered in 3 primary ways. These are ways to note that the emotion of anger has taken a turn towards sinfulness – whenever we get angry too easily, when we get angrier than we should, and when we hold onto our anger. The classic example of the first is when we come home after a long and difficult day at work and we snap at our whiney child not because she deserves it but because our patience is way too thin. That's anger turned sinful to say nothing of misdirected toward those who don't deserve it. The second is always worth a pause to ask ourselves does this situation really make sense of the level of anger I'm

feeling or am I channeling other frustrations into this? But maybe the most dangerous sign of disordered or unhealthy anger comes when we are unable to let it go, when we hold grudges, when anger turns cold and calcified into resentment. This is why Paul says very clearly, “ok, be angry, but do not let the sun go down on your anger.” Do not allow it to stew inside too long! Have it be an impetus to reconnect and restore relationship.

Someone told me last week something I wasn't fully aware of and that is that the 7 Deadly Sins is a tool used quite explicitly in Alcoholics Anonymous' 12 -step program. And this is one the things that AA says - that what kills most alcoholics is not alcohol but resentment. So step 4 in the 12-step program is “made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” in order to overcome resentments and make a truer assessment of what we are due and who is responsible. Anger calcified into resentment is a destructive force if it remains interior to oneself and it is a destructive force if it is given external expression. The writer Anne Lamotte says “resentment or not-forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.”

As I mentioned last week, every sin then has a countervailing virtue or a couple of virtues that counteract the sin. In the case of 3 of the deadly sins gluttony, lust and anger, the countervailing virtue is temperance – each of those sins contains a beautiful good that if not tempered can turn sinful. So tempering our anger, also referred to as self-possession or gentleness, is critical, stopping and reflecting upon it and honestly acknowledging what is holy in our anger and what is unholy – “a searching and fearless inventory” of it. But also the big one - LOVE - is the virtue that stands opposed to unholy anger. LOVE at times

can elicit holy anger, when someone we love has been treated unjustly, but when we can pause in our anger at someone and remember that they are a beloved child of God and that they deserve as much justice and lee-way and benefit of the doubt as we give to ourselves and others we love, then maybe anger can be tempered.

One of the dynamics in anger is that it can trigger an animal state in us where it looks like only three options are open to us – to flee or freeze or fight. We can suppress it, deny it, or unleash it. Contemplative practices like Centering Prayer and Meditation or the Welcoming Prayer practice where we actually stop for a moment to welcome an unpleasant emotion gives us a technique for allowing space and time in ourselves for us to hold our emotion without becoming captive of our emotion, to hold our anger without denying it, suppressing it or acting it out. Then the energy created therein can be used for reconnection and justice-seeking.

So towards that end since this is our annual Healing Service we wanted to give you an opportunity right here and now to spend some time reflecting on your relationship to anger. I'm going to turn it over to Kathleen who will explain to you what we'll do with the pamphlets in your bulletin.

May God bless you; healing your disordered anger and using your healthy anger for what is good and right in this world...