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“Deadly Sins: Anger”

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Luke 19:28-48

Today begins the holiest week of the year for Christians, the week when we commemorate the events that led to the death of Jesus Christ. It was a week filled with drama and turmoil, and is very important for us. Fully one third of the material in the Gospels deal with the last week of Jesus’ life, and in John’s Gospel it is one half which deals specifically with the last week of Jesus’ life. These events have much to teach us, so it is very important that we take the time to learn, study, and reflect upon exactly what happened to Jesus in those final days, and what it means for us. I am thankful that some of you have been studying all of this in the “24 Hours that Changed the World” class we have offered the last 6 weeks.

Now each week during Lent I have been examining a different deadly sin, seven of which were originally selected during the 4th century by a few monks, and then made official by Pope Gregory in 590 AD. These were lifted up as a way for human beings to understand their brokenness and need for God. These sins were made popular (if you could ever consider sins popular) by Dante Alighieri in the *Divine Comedy*. Although they have Christian origins, these sins are not necessarily Christian—whether you are an atheist, agnostic, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Jew, we are all prone to these same things. Now for the purposes of my sermon series, there are 7 deadly sins, and only 6 weeks of Lent. Then one week we celebrated Missions Sunday, so I had only 5 weeks to preach, so I selected the 5 sins of Pride, Envy, Gluttony, Sloth and Anger, while omitting the sins of Greed and Lust (thank goodness—lust would have been difficult for me!) Today we are examining Anger.

Now the last week of Jesus life begins in a very interesting way. Jesus is about to enter the city of Jerusalem, when he pauses on a hill above the city and weeps, saying “If only you knew the things that make for peace.” It is a haunting moment and in a way he is crying for all of us, for the ways we fail to understand how to live and love, fail to understand what makes for peace within us and around us. This image offers a rare glimpse of his vulnerability and humanity. He then enters the city of Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, hailed as a rock star, receiving a heroes welcome with shouts of “Hosanna in the Highest” “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” Shortly thereafter the crowds disperse, and that is pretty much all there is. Someone returns the donkey to its rightful

owner and things return to business as usual. But it is not business as usual because you can feel the tension of a gathering storm.

By the time he got to Jerusalem, people were sharply divided over his ministry. There were still some devoted and loyal followers, some that hung on his every word, but others had growing doubts and had already turned away from him. They questioned his wisdom and judgment, wondering if he had taken this “Son of God” thing a bit too far. It was this turn of events that John described like this: “Because of all of the things Jesus had said, many of his disciples turned their backs and stopped following him. He turned to the 12 disciples and asked: ‘What about you? Will you also go away?’” It is sad, because he knows things are going to get worse before they get better and that the people who hailed him on Sunday will be clamoring for his death by Friday.

He then proceeds to make people very angry. He goes to the temple, in a vivid account which is found in all 4 Gospels, where he is confronted with a busy, bustling scene and is struck by the waste, the deception, the manipulation of God's intentions for selfish purposes. This sacred space was being cheapened by greed and desire. It was a mockery of spirituality, using what was holy to promote that which was profane. All of this made Jesus very mad.

- Mad at the temple being turned into a marketplace.
- Mad at the money-changers who had turned a holy obligation into a lucrative profession.
- Mad at the Passover pilgrims, who saw the temple as a place to transact a business deal, not to remember God’s miracles and their liberation from slavery in Egypt
- Mad at the priests, who had let their love of law and ritual, take precedence over their love for God.

The abuse of this sacred space made Jesus so angry that he reacted instantaneously. He screams at the money changers and tells them to get out; he turns over tables, and predicts the total destruction of the temple. This naturally incites the Chief Priests, Scribes, and Pharisees, who are more determined than ever to destroy him. It is highly unusual to see this side of Jesus, but I am so glad we have this portrait. Although it was not good for him personally, his anger was intentional, purposeful, it brought results and returned the Temple to its holy purpose.

Anger comes from the Latin word “Ira” from which we get the English word irate. As Jesus demonstrates in this story, anger in and of itself is not necessarily a bad thing. It can be used for good, to wake people up, get their attention, and

bring about solutions to problems. Anger in certain situations can be a force for the good, just as it has been in numerous social justice movements throughout history. Anger appropriately expressed can be a positive and transforming thing.

This is a very helpful insight for me, because I was raised with the message that anger is always bad, and more specifically, nice girls should never get mad, or at least never express it. We were to be the peacemakers, the nurturers, the ones who soothe and comfort. You don't want to be viewed as an "angry woman" you want to be nice, and so you learn to suppress negative emotions such as anger. Yet I have come to realize that an incapacity for anger can be just as unhealthy and dysfunctional as screaming all the time. Anger can be a healthy and positive emotion, and it is important to acknowledge it and face it. We all have things in our lives that have made us absolutely furious—hurts, betrayals, rejections, unfairness, and we need to be honest about how we feel. The appropriate expression of anger is therapeutic, and this gives birth to something new, just as Jesus demonstrates in the Temple.

So anger, as a tool and used appropriately, can be a force for change, even a force for good. The drawback is that far too often we get angry about the wrong things, at the wrong people, and then we nurse it, feed it, and pretty soon we are filled with resentment all the time. Life will always give you something to be angry about—people are more than willing to irritate, annoy, bother and provoke. Some people only have to show up in order to make us mad.

Stupid drivers, for instance. Those people who blast by you in the fast lane on the freeway, then move over in front of you and immediately slam on their brakes. Or how about when you and 1,000 other cars have dutifully merged into one lane as you approach a big construction project -- only to watch as someone zips past all the standing traffic on the shoulder to get to the front of the line? Or people driving erratically while talking on a cell phone or putting on makeup.

Or in the grocery store, when people who get into fast line with 45 items in their cart, because the rules do not apply to them? Or people using food stamps to buy cigarettes and beer? Or people who are inconsiderate and overly critical and do not appreciate you? The list goes on and on and on. There are so many things to be indignant about, and at such times anger can be satisfying. It feels so good to get mad, to lick your wounds, nurse grievances long past, to demonize others, to fantasize about confrontations yet to come, to dwell upon the pain you have received and the pain you would like to inflict.

Yet, as annoying as so many incidents may be, they are still just annoyances, and do not really qualify as things to be furious about. These things affect us

personally but not permanently. They do not define us, and in most cases they will pass. So often our anger is misplaced, misdirected toward things that are just not that important in the overall scheme of things. A man in Dadeville, Alabama offers the perfect example. He lost a Bible-quoting contest to Gabel Taylor. Gabel simply had a better grasp of Scripture, and could remember the most obscure verses. So the man who lost became so angry that he shot Gabel in the head and killed him. Over a Scripture quoting contest! Does this seem ironic to you? Anger is a deadly sin for a reason—its expression can be deadly for others and for us. When we react in anger because of wounded pride, ego, embarrassment, frustration, it is never healthy. Our anger needs to be selective, intentional, and bigger than ourselves.

Jesus was a master at the effective use of anger, while not impulsively reacting to people and situations that upset and frustrated him. He focused upon what was really important. When arrested on trumped up charges and tried by a kangaroo court, Jesus calmly faced tormentors who tried everything to get a rise out of him. They taunted him, they mocked him, spat on him, hit at him, humiliated him -- but they never succeeded in denting his dignity or cracking his composure. In this case, Jesus did not waste energy on trying to protect or defend himself. In so many situations he would not give in to anger no matter how emotionally satisfying it might have been. Nothing good would have come of it.

When Jesus is angry it is always on God's behalf, angry at idolatry, injustice, cruelty, profaning that which is holy. This is important to remember, and it is interesting to note that God is occasionally described in the Bible as angry. We never read about God being proud, envious, slothful or gluttonous, greedy or lustful, but we do read about God's anger. God's anger is provoked by sin, ignorance, idolatry, injustice and cruelty. God gets angry when people continually turn away from Him, toward all of those things that destroy life and love. And so the anger of Jesus is always anger on behalf of God.

Those circumstances which reek of being wrong, unjust, outrageous, and unfair should make us furious, as well. People who cause profound pain with no thought for the effect it will have upon others, pain to their families, friends, employers. Out of their own selfishness or greed or ego, they leave total wreckage, without considering the effect their behavior will have upon anyone else. That there is enough food in the world to feed everybody, but people die daily from starvation and impure drinking water. That every 3 seconds someone dies from AIDS. It should infuriate us the way violence, racism, sexism and homophobia are still acceptable in our society. It should infuriate us that there are between two to four million battered women in America. We should be hopping

mad at those who take advantage of the poor, abuse children, the elderly, the vulnerable and powerless. It has been said that the true measure of a person is the size of the things that make them mad.

A holy anger helps you move from a sentimental understanding of God, to a deeper and more vigorous pursuit of God's justice, righteousness and redemption. And if anger motivates us to do that, it can change the world. Because it has changed the world time and time again.

Think of the civil rights movement, women's rights movement, movements for justice and peace. Think about Candy Lightner whose 13 year old daughter Cari was killed in 1980 by a drunk hit and run driver as she walked down a California street. The 46 year old driver, who had recently been arrested for a different DUI hit and run, left Cari's lifeless body at the scene. What would make a person more furious than losing a child to a chronic drunk driver? And yet, over time, Candy was able to channel her anger into a force for the good. She founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving, which has educated, inspired, and saved countless lives.

Inappropriate, violent, uncontrollable anger is always a deadly sin. It never leads to positive outcomes. Focused, intentional and appropriate anger can be a force for the good. In the book *The Artist's Way*, Julie Cameron writes, "Anger...is the firestorm that signals the death of our old life. Anger is the fuel that propels us into our new life. Anger is a tool, not a master. Anger is meant to be tapped into and drawn upon. Apathy and despair are the enemy. Anger is not. Anger is our friend. **Not** a nice friend. But a very, very loyal friend. It will always tell us when we have been betrayed. It will always tell us that it is time to act in the best interests of ourselves and the world. Anger is **not** an action, it is action's invitation."

And beyond anger there awaits a cleansing acceptance, for no matter what it is right now that is making you mad, and there are things to make all of us plenty mad, over time, with God's help, your anger will be transformed. Eventually you will know a forgiveness that will set you free.

I am glad that we have the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem during the last week of his life, whip-cracking mad, overturning tables and throwing those people out of the Temple. It gives us a very powerful picture of Jesus expressing righteous indignation on God's behalf. In all of the events that followed this outburst, Jesus did not show anger again. He would be betrayed, denied, brought before Pilate and mocked, humiliated, arrested, sentenced to die, and then brutally murdered. Yet even from the cross he forgave those who put him there. He loved his wayward disciples, his tormentors, his murderers, transforming pain into grace.

May God help all of us to accept the sort of love that could do such a thing,
as we prepare to follow Jesus to the cross.