

On the Art of Being Relationally Angry, Or, “I Have A Pet Tiger”

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One of the most surprising things I have learned in my 25 years of marriage to Karl, and my modest 7.25 years of being lead pastor of our church is that to sustain a joyful community (whether of 2 people or 200 people) I need to know how to practice the art of being relationally angry. Yes, *the art of being relationally angry!*

As we’ve been learning from Dr. Warner, RARE Leaders – those who build joyful engagement around things that matter – need to learn to remain relational and return to joy from all the big six negative emotions, not just Anger. But after considerable prayer and reflection about what I could profitably present in the 80 minutes I have here this morning, I have decided to zero in from multiple different angles on just the one, Anger.

I share these thoughts NOT as someone who has always had these skills but as one who definitely used to be a Conflict Avoider – which means that I did not have good capacity to deal with anger. But through the years that I’ve been in recovery from my Conflict Avoidance problem, I have come to have a great respect and appreciation for God’s choice to include Anger in the range of human emotions. And I have gotten more joyful in the process, not less.

I have also found that I am not the only one with a lot of confused notions about where Anger fits in to life and relationships, and what God intends for Anger to do for us. So this morning, I will share 4 principles that have helped Karl and I and our community increase our joy by discovering some of the benefits God meant for us to have through Anger and to reduce the collateral damage that so frequently is found with Anger.

I. Anger is Not a Sin... but it has a short shelf-life and makes a dangerous pet

We all know what the expression “shelf-life” means, right? It’s how long something can sit on the shelf and still be good for its original purpose. Medications have a specific shelf life – some lose their effectiveness after a certain time. And nearly everything in the grocery store has an expiration date on it to tell you when its shelf life is over. But of course many of us know that those items don’t just instantly go bad the day after they “expire” because many of us have eaten grocery-store items that have passed their expiration dates. Some things just don’t taste quite as good (as opposed to being toxic) – the cookies might taste a little bit stale, perhaps.

But then there are other things, especially if they’re not stored correctly, that expire a lot more dramatically... like what happened to Jim & Kitty Wilder when the contractor working on their home happened to turn off the power to their freezer The freezer that was full of pounds and pounds of no-longer-frozen fish. They discovered this unfortunate malfunction after six weeks had gone by... and by that time, flies were gathering from miles around and even the heavy freezer door could not contain the smell of the rotting fish!

Let’s consider for a moment the early-church leader Paul’s pastoral advice about anger.

²⁵ So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ **Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,** ²⁷ and do not make room for the devil. [...]

This makes me think about the shelf life of anger. Here’s what I mean.

“Be angry, but do not sin” Paul says to the early gatherings of Jesus-followers. So you can be angry, but not sin. Anger is not *inherently* sinful. And by *sinful*, do I just mean something that is on a rather arbitrary

list of God's pet peeves? Like God doesn't like that color you're wearing, so it's a sin? Is it something that will earn you a few points off if God catches you doing it? Is that what sinful means? No, "sinful" means things that miss the mark of God's way of love, God's way of shalom – where everything is just and peaceful and whole. So when I say that anger is NOT inherently sinful, I mean that anger is NOT always missing the mark of God's way of love. I mean that there **are** actually times when getting angry is the **right** thing for a follower of Jesus to do – and I'll say more about that in a little bit.

But – Paul goes on to advise “Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” And then several verses later, at verse 31, he says “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice...” Here Paul isn't just saying “Be careful not to sin when you're angry,” he's saying “Get rid of it.” So what does he really mean? Is anger OK or not? Here's how I summarize what I think he's getting at: Anger is not inherently sinful; it just has a really short shelf-life. Let me say that again: *Anger is not inherently sinful; it just has a really short shelf-life.* If you have anger, but don't take care of it properly, it's **not** just like a stale cookie. Oh no. That wouldn't be so bad. It's more like the putrid rotting fish. Perhaps this is why Paul says: “Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.” That's definitely starting to sound serious. Continuing to keep anger around when it's going bad makes room for the devil. Yikes.

Like any married couple or any close housemates, Karl and I have routine little incidents of being angry at one another. Nowadays, mostly those things happen, we deal with them, and they aren't a problem. But several years ago, we went through a sort of season of me being angry at Karl... not in a super-big way. Maybe on a scale of 1 to 10, this relational challenge was in the 3 to 5 range. So I think we were the only people who noticed it, which would have been different had it been say, in the 7 to 10 range. But anyway, I was angry at Karl for being judgmental of me about something – I don't remember the specifics anymore. I *was* angry at him, but I think of this as being anger in its cold disguised form because at the time I didn't have good skill at even *recognizing* that I was angry, let alone the ability to do something healthy with that anger before it became something worse. So if you had asked me at the time whether I was choosing to deliberately hold on to my anger – to let the sun go down on it, to keep it long after it had started to spoil – I would have told you that I wasn't doing that. I might even have said that I wasn't angry at all! [Ever seen an angry expression on a friend's face, but when you say “What are you mad about?” they say, “I'm not mad!” with clenched teeth...]

But underneath my conscious awareness I **was** angry, and not knowing didn't make it go away, it actually kept it around. And the rotting anger had toxic effects on me and our relationship.

- I became somewhat non-relational a lot of the time... less glad to be with Karl, less concerned about what he was feeling, feeling overall less joy... for married people like us, it makes one start thinking that (sigh) the romance has just dried up... and for anyone in a similar spoiling-cold anger state, there's often a feeling of “Why did I think trying to build a ministry or community with these people was going to be such a good idea?” or “What was I so excited about in working at this company? Or going to this church?”
- And the more non-relational we are the more likely we are to miss God's way of love and shalom – that is, the more likely we are to sin...
- And I did -- I got very judgmental of Karl, which is definitely a sin. So now I was judging him for judging me, and for anything else I might find to be critical of him about. It seemed to make sense at the time that my judging him was justified because of his judging me. But that spiritual math doesn't work out. Two sins don't cancel each other out. They just double the amount of sin hurting everyone.
- And when we feel less joy coming from healthy human connection, we often start looking for other things to fill the emptiness... “pseudo-joys” we call those... and for me that would include too much dark chocolate and too many computer games.
- Now in this particular example of undealt-with, spoiling anger between Karl and I that's about as far as it went. We finally started working together to figure out where all this bad stuff in our relationship was coming from, and it was kind of like following the bad smell back to the rotting

fish. But once we got back to the original reason for my being angry, and dealt with that directly, it stopped its toxic effect of sucking the joy from our lives and our relationship.

There are two other effects of toxically spoiling anger that I want to specifically mention.

- Festering anger becomes bitterness. Bitterness starts to poison our very baseline attitude about life. We see the worst in people and situations rather than the best in them and our attitudes start to become self-fulfilling prophecies. Research shows that our physical health is negatively affected by bitterness.
- And many a mental health professional will tell you that anger held and turned inward often becomes depression. Depression saps our energy to do or try anything. It takes away our enjoyment of anything, even things we used to love doing. I mean, why get up anyway? What difference will it make? Anger rotting away inside us can become depression.

Another early church leader, James says:

¹⁹ You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to **anger**; ²⁰ for your **anger** does not produce God's righteousness. James 1:19-20

And lest we think that it's just Paul and James who think we should be concerned about how we handle our anger, Jesus also gave some pretty strong warnings about it:

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that if you are **angry** with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire." Matthew 5:21-22 (NRSV)

Now there's lots of interesting theological questions we could discuss about that text, but for the present, let us just say two things: 1) we should NOT interpret this to mean that all anger is always a sin. And the reason I can say that is that Jesus himself got angry sometimes – the Bible says so explicitly in other places – but the Bible also tells us that Jesus didn't sin. And the 2) is: Jesus thinks that what we do with our anger is serious business. Just saying "Well I didn't kill anyone" or even "I didn't hit anyone" doesn't mean we are without guilt. Jesus takes a very dim view of our throwing around judgmental words against others in our anger.

Sometimes anger manifests in its hot, explosive form... in contrast to the cold distance I described in my own life when I didn't recognize and deal with my anger. For some people, un-dealt-with anger stored up inside us is like a pine forest at the end of a summer when there's been no rain for months – it only takes a spark to send it up in flames. The kid whines a few too many times, and we yell... and then see her little face crumple as she retreats inside herself, afraid of her parent. Anger fulfilling its rightful purpose is important and necessary. But anger unchecked, as the apostle James warns, does not produce God's righteousness.

Did you know that according to the National Geographic Society's website, there are more tigers kept as pets than there are living in the wild? And unfortunately that's NOT a good thing for tigers or for people. At first they're so adorable, and a pet tiger seems like a good idea: But there are numerous stories of people getting a tiger as an adorable cub and raising it as their pet, only to have it attack them or some child that looks too much like a potential lunch, later in its life. Even if a tiger is bonded to a human being from being hand raised by him for its whole life, it's still wild. And if certain predatory reflexes are triggered, often made worse by woefully cramped living conditions, then the animals can attack even the owners who raised them and love them. Much as the tiger owners would like to think their pet would never hurt them or anyone they love, incident after incident shows that they are mistaken.

Anger is kind of like that. It's something that can never be fully tamed. It has its own beauty and its rightful place in the world, **but** if you just let it run anywhere it wants to go, trusting that "it would never hurt anyone" or saying "I'm just being honest" – well, a lot of people will suffer, including you. Anger, like the semi-tamed wild animal, should never be left alone with a child. In fact, we shouldn't even turn our backs on it.

Like a wild animal, anything that can't be tamed must always be guarded. Let me say that again: **Like a wild animal, anything that can't be tamed must always be guarded.**

But coming back to my statement that anger does have its rightful and needed place in our lives, the analogy with the wild animal as a pet breaks down. We can **solve** the problem of people getting mauled by tigers kept as pets by simply **not having them** as pets. Let's instead support good environmental practices that ensure tigers will survive as a species *in the wild*. In contrast, we can't solve the dangers of anger by simply never having any. Anger is a God-given emotion and as such is part of us, and has an important purpose. Life and the world are such that there will always be reasons to feel angry. Jesus felt anger at times. And Jesus also warned us that what we do with our anger is serious business. We must learn to recognize and manage our anger. We must learn the skill of staying relational even when we're angry. For the sake of ourselves, our families and community, and for the sake of the world to whom we want to reflect the love of God, we must learn to be angry, but without sin. **And to learn to do that, we need to consider Judgment, which is my next point.**

II. Judgment is a sin. Always. But it's not the same as Anger.

Consider the words of Jesus from Matthew 7:1–5 (NRSV)

¹ “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ² For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³ Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

First of all, just **what is judgment**, this practice which Jesus is telling us **not** to engage in? We use the word commonly in a number of different ways, so I want to make some clarifications. There is a kind of judgment I prefer to call **discernment** – or at least to specify as **good judgment** – which is essential to life and to our functioning as individuals and as a community.

- **Day in and day out**, we have need of discerning which path to follow, for whom to vote, where to live, who to marry, whether some job suits our skills and needs. **This is essential, and not what Jesus is referring to here.**
- **How do we know that? Could Jesus** have meant that we are **to try to live in such a way as to never claim** to think **any direction or idea to be better than another** – to be the very paragon of accommodation? That may seem to be a solution to the problem of judging, but it leaves one in a mess in the face of many of the other commands that Jesus gave us.
- If **Jesus meant** that we were to be completely undiscerning in our lives as His disciples, then **why would he tell us** later in Matthew's gospel, that **if one of our brothers or sisters sins against us**, we should go speak to him or her, etc. (Mtw 18:15) How could we ever risk calling anything a sin, if Jesus wanted “Do not judge” to mean that we never discerned any course of action to be better or wiser or more in line with God's ways than another? **So that can't be the solution.**
- **We do need to evaluate and discern which** choices are better for us, according to Kingdom values, on a regular basis. That kind of discerning together is what happens when we practice healthy conflict. That is good judgment, and we need it.

I believe the kind of **judgment Jesus is referring to** here, that is problematic, and that He wants us **not** to practice, is a **combination of condemnation and self-righteousness.**

- **Condemnation** is deciding that the person who I am judging is not just pursuing the wrong course of action, and stands in need of correction – **it is evaluating his or her fundamental worth as a human being, and finding them not good enough, and perhaps even assessing that they are in need of punishment.**
- **Self-righteousness is an attitude of moral superiority** – though I may hide it in nicer words, underneath it all, I really believe that **I am** better than the one I'm judging – I am somehow **made of fundamentally better stuff than him** – such that if I had been given his life I would have done it better. If he were just like me, he wouldn't be in this mess.

- When we practice sinful judgment, we have left the realm of merely discerning, or simply clarifying our own opinion; **we have now moved over into evaluating the motivations** of the person we are judging, and we declare them bad.

Think about this a bit. Can any of us ever really figure out all the variables that have affected someone, and set up an equation, which could prove that someone else could have made a better decision at any given point in his life? Can we really “do that math”?

- **We CAN and we SHOULD in certain circumstances, discern** whether we think the person is making a good choice -- whether we’re going to go along with him and help him in it, or whether we’re going to try to persuade him to do something different.
- **But we CAN’T ever know what we would have done, had we lived his life.** If I had that person’s life – his childhood, his historic and cultural context, his physical strengths and weaknesses, all the rest of the events that happen to a person that are not under his control – I can never know what I would have done... and whether I would have turned out any different than he.

There is only one who CAN righteously judge others, and that is God.

So here’s why I’ve taken all this time to talk about Judgment when I said my topic was the role of Anger in a Joyful life and community – **Judgment gives Anger a bad name.** Pretty much wherever Anger is found, Judgment will be found – and it’s impossible to **be angry but not sin** unless you sort out the one from the other. It’s no wonder that people think of **Anger** as inherently sinful, because it usually has **Judgment** stuck all over it. When people feel angry, they’re often instinctively looking for some way to fight back / to feel more powerful / to drown out the emotions of helplessness or fear or shame that are making them feel angry... and Judgment is many people’s go-to weapon!

But is judgment really so bad? Even when someone is the victim of some kind of injustice?

When I was in middle school, there was a neighborhood bully who used to harass me – “Ooh, look at the chink he’d say”, and he’d make a face like this (Charlotte makes caricatured Asian face, with exaggerated buck teeth and eyes pulled from the sides) – since that’s how he saw me. It could have been a lot worse, but you know, it still hurt, and I didn’t like it. I told my mom about what he was doing, and once she knew I wasn’t in any physical danger, she tried to help me get a bigger perspective on the situation – by explaining how this boy obviously was getting poor input from his parents, and that I could rise above his taunts by knowing the truth.

All that was true, but unfortunately, in my pain and anger around feeling powerless to stop this boy from taunting me, I morphed that counsel into “Yes, he’s just a pathetic, misguided, boy – and I am so much better than him.” And I’d even point out to myself that he was *so* ignorant that he didn’t even use the “right” racial slur to insult me. (I’m a Jap, not a Chink.) Or I would note the grammatical mistakes in what he would say to me. It was all my immature, and – let’s exercise some *good judgment* and call a spade a spade – it was my own sinful way of trying to protect myself, and not feel quite so powerless to stop injustice.

So given that my motivation was understandable, was that really such a poor choice of “solution”? I’d have to say yes, it was harmful, because that habit of using judgment – even though I was provoked – moved me in the direction of being a less relational person in general. You remember that when we are relational – when the relational connection circuits of our brains are online as God intended – we are curious and have compassion on what others around us are feeling, even if we disagree with them about something. We’re not stuck on getting our own way no matter what. We are still interested in finding creative win/win solutions to problems, and we are more able to come up with them because we’re still relational with God who sends us those inspirations.

But my habit of using judgment to protect myself from pain became a way of justifying myself for being non-relational. Hey, I didn’t start this. I was just minding my own business, and that guy starts harassing me. He deserves to be judged. And even if I didn’t get physically violent or call that person insulting

names *out loud*, I had definitely ceased to be concerned about him, or to give any thought to what his life might have been like or how he came to be this way today.

And if you justify being non-relational one time, it's easier to justify it the next time you feel angry... or anxious or embarrassed or ashamed. And when you're not relational, please remember, you are not, for however long it lasts, relational with anyone – including God.

- When you're non-relational, it's harder to sense Jesus' presence with you, and harder to discern the Holy Spirit's guidance to you, because a key part of your brain's receiving hardware is off-line.
- So everything loving and good gets harder, and sinning gets way easier, and even though Jesus is with you, the more non-relational you are, the less you'll be able to perceive Him, and access His resources, and align yourself with Him.
- Have you ever noticed how so many people get SO judgmental when writing anonymously on internet blogs? Too easy to be non-relational there. It's sort of the flip side of the truth that "Love covers a multitude of sins" – *when people are non-relational, a host of sins flourish* – like bacteria in just the right environment.

Judgment reinforces being non-relational, like re-bar in concrete, and when you're non-relational you can't be fully loving. And loving is Numero Uno, the first commandment – the currency of the Kingdom. Indulging in being Judgmental is anti-RARE leadership and generally anti-JOY.

So by now you're probably asking, well what IS clean, non-sinful anger anyway? Which brings me to my next principle...

III. Don't silence the prophetic voice... even when it's angry.

My mom remembers a time when I was 5 years old and I got bullied by a 5th grade boy (so he was probably 10) who was called "Boomer." I must have told my mother something about his bothering me, because she remembers talking to the secretary at the Principal's office at our school about him. And there she found out that others had also apparently had trouble with this boy. And as my mom says, "That's what I would have done fairly easily and I would have been glad to leave it there – just talking to the school about it... I am not confrontational. Never have been and don't enjoy it. It was so not me."

But then one day my best friend, Karen, took it upon herself to tell my mom that Boomer was now threatening to break my arm. And something different happened to my non-confrontational Mom. She couldn't stop thinking about the fact that I was a little girl, and this boy should not be allowed to threaten me. When I recently asked her how she felt at that time, she said "Well it wasn't so much being angry as feeling 'righteous indignation.'" [Let me just point out that righteous indignation IS anger. But I'll come back to that later.] She was very afraid of confrontation. She was intimidated by the thought of facing off with Boomer's parents who she knew lived in one of the mansions in the wealthier neighborhood bordering on ours. But her "indignation" helped her to not just ignore this.

So later that afternoon, we were out in the car, having dropped my sister off at a piano lesson. On the way home, I pointed out someone walking on the street who I had seen with Boomer. Mom stopped the car and rolled down the window and asked him where Boomer lived. The boy pointed us to Boomer's family's big house.

We walked up to the door, Mom with my baby brother on one hip, and me standing next to her. Boomer's mother answered the door. Mom didn't yell or swear, but she told Boomer's mother that he was harassing me and threatening to break my arm. Boomer's mother was sort of aghast and somewhat defensive. We heard Boomer hidden behind the door saying something in the background. Then his mother relayed some criticism from Boomer about me. But Mom stayed strong and simply said "Look at her. She is a **little girl**." She doesn't remember saying much more than that. We went home. Later mom could hardly believe she had done it, and credited the Holy Spirit for giving her the courage. But the harassment stopped. Mom vaguely remembered hearing later on that Boomer had been sent to private school.

Now let's consider: why does God get angry? And let's start with Jesus.

Here's a famous example described in multiple ways in the Bible. Jesus and his disciples arrive in Jerusalem and go to the temple. In the outer court of the temple, there was a marketplace with animals for the required sacrifices and official money-changers through which you changed your ordinary coins for the temple's special currency. And Jesus launches into what must have been one of his most memorable lessons. While he's teaching, he began to *drive out* the sellers and the buyers and he *disrupted* the money changing. He really made a big disturbing scene.

This is not the comfortable, comforting Jesus that we often think of when we have an image of a kind shepherd in our minds. I'd say it's safe to assume that he was angry.

What's going on here? A big clue is in what he says [in Mark's account]: Jesus invokes the prophetic tradition from Isaiah 56 about how the temple is supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations. Could it be that Jesus is angry that the commercial interests related to the temple have crowded out what was to be the Court of the Gentiles – the place of welcoming non-ethnic Israelites – the nations – into God's house of prayer?

Well it turns out that such a concern for welcoming the foreigner who wants to serve God should NOT have been a new or farfetched idea to God's people. And neither was, more generally, ensuring justice for those who are without power. In the Scriptures that Jesus would have known, essentially our Old Testament, we find texts such as this: Zechariah (7:8-12) Here God is speaking through the prophet Zechariah to God's own people:

⁸The word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying: ⁹Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; ¹⁰do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. [*But God is giving this message because the people were **not** doing that, so...*] ¹¹But they refused to listen, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears in order not to hear. ¹²They made their hearts adamant in order not to hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great wrath came from the LORD of hosts.

God is saying that the people knew what was right to do, but they had hardened their hearts, and practiced corruption and injustice instead. And God got angry about it.

And back in the writings of the prophet Isaiah chapter 5, here's another typical example of why God gets angry: Here Isaiah presents a picture of God as the owner of a vineyard, and God's people Israel as the vineyard. The owner has cleared and planted the vineyard with the best plants. He builds a protective wall around it and cares for it. But the vineyard willfully does not yield the grapes it should have produced. (Remember this is a metaphor) And God – speaking through the prophet Isaiah – doesn't leave us to wonder what sort of "fruit" the vineyard produced instead. Verse 7 says:

⁷For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected **justice**, but saw bloodshed; **righteousness**, but heard a cry!

And he goes on to give even a more detailed picture:

- (v 8 says: Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you) *those who are consumed by building up their wealth and disregard God's ways of concern for the whole community*
- (vs 11-12 say: Ah, you who rise early in the morning in pursuit of strong drink, who linger in the evening to be inflamed by wine, whose feasts consist of lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine, but who do not regard the deeds of the LORD, or see the work of his hands!) *those who are characterized by indulging their own pleasures but not recognizing God's goodness to them*
- (vs 21-23 say: Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes, and shrewd in your own sight! Ah, you who are heroes in drinking wine and valiant at mixing drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe,

and deprive the innocent of their rights!) *those who think they are above the law, abuse their power and act corruptly so that the innocent suffer*

And the reason God is angry is again emphasized in verse 16:

¹⁶ But the LORD of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness.

God gets angry at injustice – and particularly at people who are supposed to be the ones demonstrating God’s ways to the watching world when they don’t practice justice in their relationships.

And these two texts I’ve just mentioned are just a couple of representative examples. There’s plenty more of God getting angry specifically at injustice (Is 1:21 & 24; Is 10:1-4; Jer 5:21-29; Jer 21:11; Jer 22:3-5; Amos 5). And don’t miss what Jesus said in his **anger** at some of the religious leaders of his day, with similar words recorded in both Matthew 23 and Luke 11:

²³ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: **justice** and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. Matthew 23:23 (& Luke 11:42)

In short, God gets angry at injustice, especially injustice against those without power.

Sometimes we get angry at injustice too. And that’s no shame. And that’s not wrong. In fact that’s having our hearts aligned with the heart of God. There are things that happen that make God angry, and they should make us angry too.

You know what makes me angry? It makes me angry that not every childhood experience of injustice can be solved as easily as my mother solved mine. I do come from a bi-racial Japanese-American family, and we’ve all over the years been hurt by racism. But really in this case what happened was that my white, native English speaking, college-educated mother asserted herself appropriately to some other white people, and was heard. And then no men in hoods showed up on our porch. My father didn’t lose his job. The harassment I was experiencing stopped, it didn’t get worse. It makes me angry to know that the issues of getting justice for a child of more color are much more complicated because like it or not, we have all of us in this country internalized negatively biased attitudes towards people of color.

Here’s another example: Most people have probably heard of the Arizona law SB 1070 introduced about 4 years ago which allows law enforcement to detain and question anyone they think “looks undocumented.” The issues of injustice around racial profiling are enough to be angry about, but what bothered me even more was finding out that that law came about because of the initiative of a private company called Corrections Corp of America who runs prisons for profit, and they were looking for more business in Arizona. According to Nick Rathod, an attorney familiar with the situation, Corrections Corp first approached the Arizona government, but the government said “We don’t need more prisons just now.” So Corrections Corp approached a company called the American Legislative Exchange Council (or ALEC) who helped them draw up this legislation and get the support of the key government officials to get it passed. And then, lo and behold, there’s a need for more prisons to accommodate all these newly detained folks! A local organizer I met when I was at our denominational convention in Phoenix three years ago said that the SB 1070 profiling law had had a cascade effect of increasing crime in Latino/a communities because now people are unwilling to call the police for anything – burglary, domestic violence – because they wouldn’t want to be indirectly responsible for their undocumented neighbor or extended family member possibly being picked up while the police are in the area. We have enough of a challenge in this country, trying to figure out how to manage immigration in a just way, but incarcerating more people and effectively alienating whole communities so that a private corporation can make more money is not a good solution.

That makes me angry. And I think it should. I think Isaiah and Zechariah and Jesus would have something to say about the priority of corporate profit over the common good and about abusing power over the foreigner in our midst.

So why did God include anger in the range of human emotions?

Maybe at least a part of the reason is because sometimes anger helps us find our voice to push back against injustice. Anger can be a catalyst and a wake-up call complete with a shot of adrenaline to help us get started. It can be a message, or a warning light flashing on the dashboard of our hearts – saying “this is wrong.” This is certainly what happened to my mother when she heard this boy was threatening to break my arm. She got angry because that was wrong. And my ordinarily non-confrontational, admittedly conflict avoidant mother, actually went and made her voice heard to the people who needed to hear it.

However, let me also say that I wonder if people came up with the expression “righteous indignation” because of the common confusion about whether anger is a sin. Just in case someone might accuse them of sinning, they wanted to have a whole separate category for being upset about injustice, which people intuitively recognized was necessary and right. But the more I think about it, the more I think it’s actually important to realize that whether it starts for a noble reason – like wanting to fight injustice – or for a lesser one – like someone didn’t give me what I want when I want it – *anger is still that wild tiger that we’re keeping as a pet*. And we have to learn how to guard it so that its beauty can be appreciated but so that it doesn’t maul someone. Anger that mauls won’t help our fight against injustice or our personal relationships.

And not only that, but we people are complicated, and our reasons for being angry are mixed with noble and selfish reasons, more often than not. Remember that simply feeling anger is usually involuntary – you don’t choose to feel it, it just happens, on your fast track brain system – so it’s not a question of deciding whether or not to feel it. The question is what you will do about it. And there’s one more principle I want to address to fill out the picture.

IV. Recognize your own anger... especially *Anger-In-Search-Of-A-Story*

The movie, *Seabiscuit*, is based on the true story of the amazing racehorse by that name who rose to fame during the Great Depression. In the story, we meet a young man named Red Pollard, who is recruited to be the feisty and temperamental horse’s jockey. After the horse has been rehabilitated and trained enough to race, he and Red start to show some promise. But then they have a race in which Pollard way overreacts in anger to another jockey’s actions, and in so doing, loses the race.

The horse’s owner, Charles Howard, steps up in a fine example of RARE leadership, and instead of just chewing Red out for losing, or telling him how he shouldn’t have been angry, still seems to remember Red’s real self, not just this current malfunction. Howard instinctively recognizes that something else has to be going on for Red to do something so stupid. So eventually Howard asks him “Son, what are you really angry at?” And then we the audience, are reminded of the how Red’s parents, desperate in their poverty during the Depression, had abandoned Red to the care of a horse trainer years before. That awful attachment pain was the understandable source of a well of anger he has been carrying with him all the years since.

When anger occupies an unhealed wound in our hearts, it doesn’t just lie there inert. It looks for ways to come out and finally have its day in court so to speak. So when something happens in the present that stirs up anger – and especially if there’s any common theme to the present situation and the old anger – then the old anger latches on to the story in the present and we feel utterly convinced that this present situation is the real reason why we are angry.

This is what we mean by having Anger-in-search-of-a-story. If you’re familiar with my husband Karl’s work on the Verbal Logical Explainer then you’ll understand how the VLE will take old pain that shows up in the present as implicit memory and then find a way to explain how something in the present is the reason you feel that way.

So if we want to learn the art of being relationally angry, we need to commit to seeing our anger. And then we need to learn to decode it, which includes asking ourselves “Am I feeling *old anger* right now? Do I have ‘Anger in search of a story’ that’s amplifying my present anger?” You may want to seek out help from a counselor or do some Immanuel Prayer to find healing where it’s needed. Because when the old hurts get healed, everything gets easier in the present. You just won’t get angry as often. It becomes less of a problem.

Conclusion: Learn the art of being relationally angry (or responsible work-arounds)... to increase joy in all your relationships!

It’s important to know anger isn’t a sin so that we’re willing to see it and own it in ourselves... And so we don’t miss out on the good purposes God has for it -- of helping us work against injustice, set appropriate boundaries, or speak up when we’re being inappropriately silenced.

Then it’s important to understand the dynamics of Judgment so that we don’t confuse it with Anger; and so we don’t ever try to justify it, and in so doing reinforce non-relational fear and shame-based community dynamics.

And we need to learn to recognize our own anger-in-search-of-a-story -- amplifying our reactions, and making good anger habits nearly impossible to master. And then take responsibility for getting healing.

Note that a responsible work-around for those whose wounds are making it impossible to be relational when you first get angry, is to take responsibility for not responding out of your non-relational state, and getting relational again as quickly as you can.

Metaphor and enacted prayer: Finally, I want to finish with a metaphor and an enacted prayer of commitment, both of which our community found meaningful in learning the art of being relationally angry (managing our pet tigers). First the metaphor:

O the wonders of washing one’s hands with soap! Do you have any idea of the advantages that we enjoy because we live in a country that not only has soap available pretty much everywhere, but is also developed enough to have the habit of washing ingrained in so many people from an early age? Worldwide, 6.6 million children per year don’t make it to their 5th birthday, and many of these tragic early deaths are caused by preventable big killers like diarrhea and pneumonia. But washing your hands with soap can reduce diarrhea by half, and respiratory infections by one third. Washing your hands with soap has a positive impact against flu, SARS, and trachoma. In recent *cholera* and *Ebola* outbreaks, one of the key public health interventions was hand washing with soap. Doing it helps keep kids in school. According to expert Dr. Miriam Sidibe, it can save over 600,000 children every year. So let us continue to wash and be healthy and thankful!

Learning to identify your own anger, and sifting out and eliminating judgment from your personal and community interactions, are as beneficial to a community’s mental health and joy level as washing hands with soap is to a community’s physical health and infectious disease control.

You know you don’t have to work in an open sewer or an infectious disease lab or a hospital to get germs on your hands. Ordinary life and experience is enough. But if all of us ordinary people didn’t regularly wash our hands with soap, the health of our whole community would decline. Similarly, you don’t have to be a horrible monster of a person to get angry and to be judgmental. All of us do it. Let’s just admit that right now. And sometimes we acquire the habit of being judgmental in what are understandable circumstances! But we can each contribute to the overall health of our community by regularly and routinely repenting of our judgments against others. This is like spiritually washing our hands and not passing on the harmful germs of our judgments.

And furthermore, if we pro-actively learn to catch ourselves being judgmental, so that we can repent right away, it’s like being able to stop yourself from being contagious with some dread disease. Rather than going around infecting people with the spiritual *Ebola* of your judgments, you can learn to detect their

toxic presence and ask God to wash them away. So I'd say, pay attention:

- Any time – yes, **any time** that you are feeling contempt or outrage at another person, I would give you 100 to 1 odds that you are being judgmental.
- OR, Karl and I once heard therapist and author Terence Real describe how he could feel being judgmental in his body – it was a sensation of his neck getting longer and his gaze changing to be looking down his nose at someone. That physical sensation helped him catch himself being judgmental so he could make a different choice.
- Or, if you find yourself thinking or saying “He always does...*something bad*,” or “She never pulls her weight,” you're probably being judgmental.
- Sarcasm is often thinly veiled judgment... watch for that.

We can learn to do the *naming without the shaming* -- naming issues, conflicts, opinions, but without trying to heap shame on the person with whom we disagree. *You're not being more Biblically faithful by using judgment to try to win an argument.* You're only adding SIN into the mix – which erodes joy.

Enacted prayer: And here is the exercise that our community did as part of our efforts to learn the art of being relationally angry – to let anger function in the ways God intended and to reduce the amount of collateral damage caused by the unguarded wild pet: We recognized that seeing our anger – recognizing that we ARE angry – is necessary for us to learn the habit of how to be angry but not sin. If we don't acknowledge at least to ourselves that we are angry, we won't be able to stop and reflect on what's the best way to use that anger. So we provided an opportunity to participate in enacting our intention – or maybe we could call it making a prayer more visible and memorable through an action.

[Liturgy starts with Charlotte lighting Christ candle]

Here is the prayer I offered for those who desired to participate:

With the help of the Holy Spirit, I purpose to see my anger, and to use it God's way.

“**With the help of the Holy Spirit**” is a humble recognition that we need God's help to do this! Old habits die hard. Anger can be a wild animal, and we need the Spirit's power.

“**I purpose to see my anger**” means that you are being clear about your desire and your intention to acknowledge to yourself when you feel anger. Saying this is renouncing any earlier misguided decision or inner vow we may have made, consciously or unconsciously, to never be angry. We remember that it's not a sin to be angry – so that should make it a little easier to admit to ourselves or to others. We are also recognizing that anger isn't voluntary – it is an emotional reaction to something in your environment. You WILL feel angry sometimes, you can't choose not to. But you can choose to practice seeing it!

“**and to use it in God's way**” is recognizing that although feeling angry is not a sin, what we do with that anger may very well be a sin – and we want to use our anger in the righteous ways that God intended – ways that may produce some heat, but no collateral damage.

Now as I said, this was an opportunity to take a prayer action. So for that purpose we used small pieces of flash paper which is sometimes used by magicians to produce fire effects in their shows. But it's not magic, it's just made of nitrocellulose that burns away completely when it's lighted. It leaves no ash or residue. It just disappears in the flame.

Participants took a piece of the flash paper, held it in some metal tongs, spoke the prayer “With the help of the Holy Spirit, I purpose to see my anger, and to use it God's way” and then enacted the prayer by lighting the paper from the candle representing the Holy Spirit, seeing the flash, and noticing that there was no residue – no collateral damage from anger used in God's way.

Some people chose to write on their paper some anger-related problem that they were seeking the Spirit's

power to overcome... like maybe being judgmental or bitter or withdrawn or violent or vengeful or irresponsible when angry.

Now I had hoped that we could give everyone here a chance to do this, but I'm afraid that wasn't logistically feasible. But I do invite anyone who would like to pray this prayer commitment here now to do so with me while I demonstrate the flash. [**Charlotte leads group in reciting prayer: "With the help of the Holy Spirit, I purpose to see my anger, and to use it God's way," as she lights the paper**]

So... Lord, hear and see our prayers, and pour out your holy fire upon us, that all of who we are, even in our anger, may glorify You.

And one last bit of Immanuel liturgy that we use at our church – as I put out the Christ candle, I say **"Even in the dark"** – and the congregation responds with **"Jesus is with us"...**