

**Healing Anger**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
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**Text: Mark 1:40-45**

Summon to mind's eye your picture of Jesus, and hold it for a moment in your imaginative gaze. What does Jesus look like?

Of course we'll never know what Jesus of Nazareth looked like when he walked the earth two millennia ago, but our image does affect our understanding of him. Not surprisingly, studies have found that we tend to picture Jesus looking like ourselves, with similar racial characteristics and skin color, even though we know he was a Middle Eastern Jew. Sallman's *Head of Christ*—with burnished golden hair flowing to shoulder length and a far-away, other-worldly expression—has shaped the image for many. A friend was describing her picture recently: "He's a tender, warm, emotionally-responsive person"—and my mind did a quick calculation: t-w-e-r-p. A twerp. Unfortunately, this picture may dominate in many people's minds. And it is unfortunate, because it makes Jesus sound too good to be true, and limits the points of connection we have with him. For example, did anyone's picture of Jesus show him angry?—eyes blazing, face contorted in rage? Do you ever imagine him losing his temper, crying out in frustration, or silently seething? I'm betting not, because how could the Savior of the World be angry? Isn't that an emotional response indicating loss of control that is best kept in check?

On the surface of it, our morning text has nothing to do with these questions. But a little footnote identifying a textual problem suggests that biblical translators down through the ages have done exactly what we have done: filtered out a questionable descriptor in favor of one that is more palatable, more fitting with their image of the Son of God. They've sacrificed linguistic accuracy to reinforce their picture of Jesus as sympathetic to human suffering. In so doing, they have blunted a dimension of Jesus that could provide insight to our human anger. You can catch the footnoted variance if you read along with me from the chapel/pew Bibles on page 35 of the New Testament portion.....from the gospel according to Mark, in the first chapter at the 40<sup>th</sup> verse. Listen for God's Word to the Church!

[MARK 1:40-45]

There it is—the word translated "pity" is more accurately rendered "anger", and in fact, among the numerous extant writings, is done so more often. The strong Greek word literally means to turn one's intestines, which parallels the Latin root of anger meaning "to strangle."

What an evocative picture that gives us! We can't blame the scripture translators for substituting "pity" as a way of highlighting Jesus' caring response to the leper, whom he immediately heals. But not so fast! Is there a blessing to be yielded from struggling with the more difficult and even troubling reading? When approached by this leper, why in the world would Jesus be angry?

Recall that leprosy was the general diagnosis for many diseases widely believed to be contagious. The law prohibited contact with lepers, and excluded them from public gathering, even religious services. Lepers were forced to live outside the community, and were considered ritually unclean. Touching a leper meant that you would become unclean too—you would "catch" the condition as well.

Was Jesus angry then because this leper—in flagrant disregard for sacred law—had drawn near to him and threatened to contaminate his own spiritual purity? But that doesn't square with the fact that Jesus compounded the legal infraction by reaching out his hand to the man with healing. If Jesus had been concerned about breaking the law of Moses, he might have recoiled from the man, rather than touching him.

I think Jesus' anger was provoked by the fact of the man's illness and its terrible consequences—both his physical suffering and the social isolation it caused. I think Jesus was angry with the religious basis for his exclusion from the warmth of human community and divine grace. I think Jesus was angry because this was not the world God intended; this was not the way God created life to be. All these things came into sharp view in the plaintive plea of the leper, and Jesus was moved with anger.

It was not the only time Jesus exhibited such a reaction. Think of him forcefully chastising the religious establishment: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees....blind guides, hypocrites, whitewashed tombs....!" Think of Jesus surveying the buying and selling going on in the temple and the white-hot rage that filled him. He kicked over tables, made a whip and drove the money-changers out, saying that they had turned God's house into a "den of thieves." Jesus got angry when evil even temporarily thwarted God's good and loving purposes for the world.

When the leper cried out "Make me clean!" he was crying out for healing, and for more than healing. He was crying out to be restored to the human community, to be freed from infirmity and become fully human again. And whether he knew it or not, he was also praying: Thy will be one on earth as it is in heaven. He was pleading for God's way to overcome evil, not someday, but today; not in heaven, but here and now.

*[I am indebted to the Rev. William Willimon for this perspective, as quoted in Pulpit Resource, VI. 34 No.1, p. 31]*

And an angry Jesus, moved by righteous indignation, said without hesitation, "Yes. I will." And he stretched out his hand and touched and healed him and sent him to the priests to show them that the love of God has overcome death, that holy anger has resulted in healing power and the breaching of walls that had made the man an outcast.

Oh yes, Jesus got angry. And his anger threatened the religious powers so deeply that they wanted to kill him. And you know the rest of that story. It's also a good lens to contrast Jesus' anger with our own.

*I don't get mad---I get even.*

Despite the disclaimer, that superficially satisfying bit of warning reveals why anger can be so destructive. Hasn't it been our rallying cry from time to time—our legitimate reaction when we've been attacked, when we've been taken advantage of, when we've been unjustly accused of wrongdoing? There's something very human and perfectly logical in wanting to "even the score," and bring the scale back into balance. But whether personally or on a community level, this kind of retaliatory response doesn't work and will far more likely lead to Gandhi's observation that "if we live by the law of an eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth, soon the whole world will be toothless and blind."

Jesus' expressions of anger were motivated by injustice leveled against others. He railed against the callous application of the law to destroy rather than heal; against religious practices that imprisoned rather than liberated. Never once do you find Jesus venting anger on his own behalf, because of unfair treatment, to "even the score." And when all was said and done—when he'd been insulted, misrepresented, condemned to die, his word from the cross was not a howl of rage, but a cry of mercy: *Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing.*

Jesus' anger grew out of his love for all people: for the political and religious leaders who sought his destruction as surely as the poor and sick who needed him. He grieved for those whose hearts were unmoved by a God who seeks to save life, whose desire is for the healing of the whole creation. He wanted more for earth's inhabitants than to wander sightless, toothless, and lost.

Are we angry enough in this sense? Are we outraged by injustice, grieved by conditions of violence and entrenched poverty in our community and world? A bumpersticker I saw not long ago put it provocatively: *If you're*

*not mad, you're not paying attention.* Certainly a potent call to awareness. But I wonder if it goes far enough. The world is full of angry people, hell-bent, it seems, on fighting, on terrorizing, on disconnecting from others. Following in Jesus' footsteps, we must ask another question. Does our anger move us into increased awareness and understanding, or does it further isolate us by causing us to retreat, to pull in and draw back in fear?

Remember in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, the character of the "elder brother"? You know, the "good son" who stayed at home and work hard for his father while his younger brother lived it up on wine, women, and song. When that younger brother returned, broke and humbled, their father was so happy that he threw a big party and killed the fatted calf. But the elder brother, the poor, good, play-by-the-rules elder brother, who probably wanted nothing more than justice done, the "score evened"—well, he just couldn't celebrate. The Bible puts it tellingly, "He was angry and would not go in."

This is deadly anger that prevents us from knowing reconciling love, that reinforces the walls between us, that causes us to judge rather than forgive. And how different from healing anger that moves us to act with compassion, that keeps us restless as long as persons suffer; the anger that does not seek so much to "get even" as it does to get us together.

The apostle Paul wrote, "Be angry, but do not sin." Perhaps anger per se is not the culprit, for it is part of our human experience and can even become a force for good. Anger becomes deadly, however, when it is misdirected. Anger that is denied or suppressed can eat us alive. Anger that is nourished and cherished will feed on itself and consume us as surely as the anger that lashes out in the unkind word that can never be unspoken. So the question becomes what you and I *do* with our anger.

In the first church I served as a pastor, an elderly couple shared the secret of their 55-year marriage. "We made a commitment," the husband said, "never to go to bed angry. And we've kept it." The wife added, "Yes, though we've had a lot of very late nights." Maybe they're on to something by persisting in communicating beyond anger and hurt into understanding and accommodation. Similarly to Jesus, let our anger propel us into action, into choices that bring blessing and wholeness to others. Anger's close kin is passion, a powerful emotion that makes you come alive, to act decisively and compellingly, and truth be told, sometimes a little irrationally, and against all odds.

Friends, we will never understand why evil persists in a world ruled by a good and gracious God. We may never know why bad things happen to

good people. When Jesus came face to face with illness, with suffering, with evil, he got angry, filled with righteous indignation. He did not sit around and theologize about it. He said, I choose to be part of the healing. He reached out, he got involved, he touched broken and sick humanity and healed them. We don't have a photograph of Jesus to show us what he looked like. But because of Jesus, we have a picture of God, one indelibly etched in love and compassion, in healing and hope. A picture to keep firmly in our hearts and minds as we figure out what to do with the precious and fleeting moments of our lives.

**O THE DEPTH OF THE RICHES AND WISDOM AND MERCY OF GOD!  
FOR FROM GOD AND THROUGH GOD AND TO GOD ARE ALL THINGS.  
TO GOD BE GLORY FOREVER. AMEN.**

**Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor**