

Anger, Church, and the Gospel

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“There is a deep, pervasive anger in my congregation. It is just under the surface, but often it feels like it is ready at any moment to break the surface and spew everywhere like lava.”

“I so want my congregation to feel like a safe space, but that is proving to be a thin veil, and the tiniest thing these days pierces it.”

“Look, I know that anger sometimes accompanies the beginning of change, and if we can manage it, that anger can just be part of the mix. But it seems that it is becoming harder and harder to manage. It grows out of control too easily.”

“Anger too quickly turns into ‘offense’ in my ministry setting.”

“Folks seem to be bringing so much anger from their lives—I mean look at what’s going on in our world these days—and just letting it overflow into church. It is confusing and it is hurtful.”

“Reflective spaces to work on the anger in church seem to be rare. How do we create and maintain those spaces?”

“I feel alone as a pastor dealing with everyone’s anger.”

“It does seem to be a ‘mean season’ out there in ministry, especially for women who are leading congregations.”

“Do you have to absorb a lot of anger to live in mystery?”

“Well, I guess no anger, no fire!”

“It’s grief. It’s anxiety. It’s fear. But it’s presenting itself as anger most days.”

“Anger in my congregation seems to be a layer over an experience of sadness and fear.”

In my current ministry role, I travel widely to large cities and small towns and spend a lot of time talking with individual pastors and cohorts of clergy representing diverse settings, outlooks, backgrounds, and theological perspectives. One of the most prominent impressions left by all these encounters: anger is everywhere in our culture and in our churches.

While by no means a scientific poll, many pastors are sharing with me that anger from “out there in society” is spilling into congregations in notable ways. Every pastor is familiar with navigating strong passions and opinions in the congregation. What is being reported now is different. People who come into church are coming from a society fraught with conflict, division, stress, and language that is often weaponized by our political environment. One pastor said to me, “Folks can’t take that to work—their jobs are already tenuous. They can’t take it home with them—their homelife, likewise, is stressed to the max. Where can they take their pent-up frustration, anxiety, and yes, anger? They take it to church.” (It should be noted that I have also heard school principals say similar things about how parents and community members are “bringing it” into schools.) There is an often-displaced anger at—what? The world as it is, society in its failings, the politics of the moment, the economic squeeze that continues among all but the “top of the class,” all these seem to breed anger, resentment, and fear that spills over into “soft-targets” like churches. After the weekend of

gun violence in both El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, that claimed at least 31 lives in August of 2019, a Canadian report on these shootings focused on the epidemic of gun violence in the United States. In response to the claim that it was media-driven or because of mental illness, the report noted:

Every country has the same video games, media, and social media. In terms of mental illness, research has shown that mental illness is not necessarily a predictor of future violence. In fact, most mentally ill people have violence perpetrated on them. What it is really about is access to guns. We have also found that anger plays much more of a role in these kinds of shootings. It is a deadly mix of access to guns and anger. Even in shootings of less magnitude, a lot of the people who were being shot every day were people who would probably get into a scuffle or a fist fight, but they had a gun in a glove compartment or on their person, so it became a shooting instead. But it all starts in anger.¹

Of course, not all anger gets expressed in the horrific acts of violence we experience regularly in our society. But there is a pervasive anger that is at work among us that is fraying community, family, and congregational relationships. Often the pastor is on the receiving end of the initial “anger blast.” And before we begin searching for “the cause,” this anger seems stubbornly non-partisan. A recent national poll² reported:

The political and cultural upheaval of the last four years has divided the country on ever-hardening partisan and generational lines, but one feeling unites Americans as much as it did before the 2016 election. They’re still angry. And still unsettled about the future. The latest NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll finds that—despite Americans’ overall satisfaction with the state of the U.S. economy and their own personal finances—a majority say they are angry at the nation’s political and financial establishment, anxious about its economic future, and pessimistic about the country they’re leaving for the next generation. “Four years ago, we uncovered a deep and boiling anger across the country engulfing our political system. Four years later, with a very different political leader in place, that anger remains at the same level.”

C.S. Lewis once described hell as a vast, gray city, inhabited only at its edges, with rows of empty houses in the middle of the city. These houses are empty because everyone who once lived in them has gotten into an argument with neighbors and moved, then gotten into an argument with new neighbors and moved again. As they fight and move, they flee farther from the center of the city, leaving empty streets full of empty houses. Lewis says that is how hell got so large—it’s empty at the center and inhabited only on the fringes.³ Likewise, it seems societal anger is pulling apart the fabric by which we maintain community and connection.

Deep, boiling anger. Division. Pessimism. Despair. Anxiety. Communities divided. Trust fraying. This seems like the most appropriate setting for deep, grounded, imaginative, and bold preaching in Lent. That churches and pastors are on the front

lines of absorbing societal anger is both regrettable and reason for pause, but also an opportunity for reflection and action. This present day is the urgent moment when the word of hope and deep love needs to be spoken to confront the anger and to accompany our anxiety and grief.

In 1975, Walker Percy published a collection of essays, *The Message in the Bottle*, in which he posed, among many challenging thoughts, this question: “Here near the end of the twentieth century, with all the startling progress and achievements all around us, why are (human beings) so sad?”⁴ If the church—in its witness and preaching—cannot address this fundamental, despairing question along with its attendant anger and alienation, what exactly are we doing as stewards of God’s grace and love and hope?

The aforementioned weekend, when the news of shootings in El Paso was followed quickly by equally horrible accounts of shootings in Dayton, meant that once again preachers were faced with the late Saturday decision: How do I modify the worship service in the morning to acknowledge this? And do I change my sermon? On a social media site that weekend, pastors debated this and shared their way forward. Among the posts were ones that were not the majority sentiment but also far from outliers. One post said: “I’m punting my sermon on Jeremiah and we’re going to have a conversation in worship about guns instead.” Another said: “Well, there goes my sermon on the Sermon on the Mount. That seems hardly adequate to addressing these tragedies.” Really? If we reach the point where the truth of Jeremiah and the holy imagination of the Sermon on the Mount do not meet the challenge of the day—whatever it is on this particular day—then we have permanently lost our voice and our place in this angry and divided society. If church feels like the rest of our lives, why go to church? If worship is a rote repurposing of the latest opinions of the day (from whichever side of things we favor), what word from beyond the known, the tired, the predictable can break in and breathe new life and offer us living water?

Breathing new life can come in many forms. And in scripture, as well as life, not all anger is destructive or hope denying. Several years ago, Cecilia Munoz used the platform of NPR’s *This I Believe* series to press this point. “I believe that a little outrage can take you a long way,” is her arresting first sentence.⁵

Munoz recalls a moment in her childhood when a family friend said something to her and her parents that was so ugly, so dismissive, and so offensive, that she became deeply angry. “My outrage that day became the propellant of my life, driving me straight to the civil rights movement where I’ve worked ever since,” she continues. “I guess outrage got me pretty far. I found jobs in the immigrant rights movement. I moved to Washington to work as an advocate. I found plenty more to be angry about along the way and built something of a reputation for being strident. Someone once sent my mom an article about my work. She was proud and everything but wanted to know why her baby was described as ‘ferocious.’” Munoz is honest about many of the costs of her anger. She notes:

Anger has a way, though, of hollowing out your insides. In my first job, if we helped 50 immigrant families in a day, the faces of the five who didn’t qualify haunted my dreams at night. When I helped pass a bill in Congress to help Americans reunite with their immigrant families, I could

only think of my cousin who didn't qualify and who had to wait another decade to get her immigration papers.

It's like that every day. You have victories but your defeats outnumber them by far, and you remember the names and faces of those who lost. I still have the article about the farm worker who took his life after we lost a political fight. I have not forgotten his name—and not just because his last name was the same as mine. His story reminds me of why I do this work and how little I can really do.

Munoz helps us identify the fragile ecosystem where even justifiable, justice-seeking anger is risky. "I am deeply familiar with that hollow place that outrage carves in your soul," she concludes. "I've fed off of it to sustain my work for many years. But it hasn't eaten me away completely, maybe because the hollow place gets filled with other, more powerful things like compassion, faith, family, music, the goodness of people around me. These things fill me up and temper my outrage with a deep sense of gratitude that I have the privilege of doing my small part to make things better."

While grateful to Munoz for giving us a vision of anger as a propellant in the quest for justice, I wonder if she does not treat the "hollowed out place" that outrage carves with too little attention. I don't believe that anger-carved hollow spaces get filled automatically or casually. In fact, anger can be so pervasive and so over-powering that there needs to be intention in how any of us—and especially how the church of Jesus Christ—deal with the anger of our present age. It also seems that while anger can be confronted and it can be opposed, what is really needed is for anger-carved hollowness to be filled. Anger is an absence. It is an emptiness. It is a void. This is the role of faith—and of preaching, especially in Lent. We tell the truth about the world that is teetering on the edge of destruction, and into that carved-out-by-anger hollow space, we offer the fullness of the gospel.

Lenten texts model this for us. Jesus' temptation in Matthew for the First Sunday in Lent concludes after the devil's three invitations with an "angry" word from Jesus: "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God'" (Matthew 4:10). Often, with the escalation of vitriol today, the church has been better at the first part of that verse than the second. We need both: a rejection of evil in all its intentions and a redirection to worship the God of our salvation and to serve God on God's terms.

Passive-aggressive anger threads its way through the gospel text for the Fourth Sunday in Lent (John 9:1-41). The dispute between the religious establishment and Jesus seeks to snare both a person healed from blindness and that man's parents. The one who was blind from birth, who now can see because of Jesus, keeps offering the refrain: "All I know is I was blind and now I can see." The passage reaches its conclusion as John (v. 39-41) records: "Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see," your sin remains.'"

Anger in all its forms blinds us to essential truths about our life and how we are to live in God's world. Anger, even in service of righteousness, needs "sight." Jesus' vision of a world of truth, love, justice, peace, fullness, and hope is the gift of sight

he seeks to give.

John 11:1-45 (Fifth Sunday in Lent) describes Jesus calling Lazarus out of the tomb in preparation for Jesus to enter it. The anger here is to the side: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Notice that Jesus does not engage Martha or Mary at the level of their anger at his absence. Jesus goes to the heart of the gaping chasm of their loss and focuses his power and presence there. Anger has a way of reducing our field of vision and our measurement of what is truly important. Jesus never let a smaller world shrink his sense of the larger world in which God has called us to live. Anger can never be the sole measure of our commitment and passion.

The whole sweep of Holy Week texts—from Palms through Passion to Resurrection—bears witness that anger, strife, division, anxiety, and violence are as real in the First Century as they are today, but they are not the final word. Jesus is passive in his arrest and trial (hence, *Passion* week). There is a power and presence at work larger than all the conflict that infuses these narratives. The anger, strife, division, anxiety, and violence are not ignored. But they are not only opposed. They are replaced. God’s larger world of grace is offered to displace and replace an anger-produced shrunken world. This is hard work in the heat of the moment and in the face of persistent injustice. It takes trust, dependence, and a radical faith in God.

In the song *Everybody’s Cryin’ Mercy*, Mose Allison wrote and Bonnie Raitt sings:

I don’t believe the things I’m seein’.
I’ve been wonderin’ ‘bout some things I’ve heard.
Everybody’s crying mercy
When they don’t know the meaning of the word.⁶

Churches and the pastors who serve them faithfully might wonder if anyone knows the meaning of the word *mercy* today. Or grace. Or joy. Or hope, life, love, or wholeness. The choice to trust this gospel often has to be made in the heat of some confrontation. Do we trust that love really is stronger than hate? Do we believe that hope truly does triumph over despair? Do we know the meaning of the word *mercy* in a world of such anger? We forget it at our peril. The anger of this age certainly needs to be opposed. But opposition is not nearly enough.

A recent sermon⁷ by Craig Barnes centered on the text of two of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:6-7): “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled, and blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.” These two verses address perhaps as well as anything in scripture the challenge of anger and its response. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” is followed immediately by “Blessed are the merciful.” Whether anger in our culture is righteous, fueled by opposition to injustice, or whether that anger is self-righteous—a bullying fear that devours us and lays waste to those around us—anger cannot be addressed apart from mercy. We all need mercy. If we are Cecilia Munoz and our outrage fuels our good works but hollows us out, we need the mercy of the grace of God to fill that which has been carved out in our souls. If we ourselves are the angry bullies who are frustrated by our lives and the petty tyrannies of our world, we need mercy to calm our sin-sick souls. And if we are on the receiving end of that anger, that fear

and despair, we need mercy to heal. We need God's grace to heal us, and we need grace to offer mercy to the very ones who play the role of bullies in life.

Barnes continues that sermon with a story. "In a Christian community outside of Edinburgh, there is a statue of two figures kneeling, facing each other in a tender embrace. Their heads are resting on each other's shoulders. One of these is Adam—representing all our humanity. The other is the Christ. The stone is so woven together that it is difficult to distinguish the two figures, except that one of them has nail scars on his hands. This is the embrace we are all hungering and thirsting to find." And it is only given to us by the grace of God. We don't find Christ; Christ finds us. Christ will even find us in our anger—or being the target of anger—and Christ will fill each hollowed out place that anger leaves in its wake.

Barnes concludes:

That statue of Adam and Christ embraced to the point where they are intermingled is found at the House of the Transfiguration, which for many years was led by Father Roland Walls. Father Roland's own turning point in his life came during a retreat at another spiritual community. It was a three-day retreat and the Abbott gave him three statements to meditate on—one for each day. On the first day, he was told to meditate solely on the statement "God loves you." Nothing else, just focus your life on those three words. The second day, it was time to focus on a second statement: "You can love God." And then, after spending those first two days on those two statements, the final day, and the Abbott cautioned that this was the hardest one of all. "You can love others."⁸

The progression of these three statements is crucial. We comprehend, in all the ways we can, the depth of God's love for us. We are touched by that love so deeply that we are led to respond. Then we see that love as the heart of all we do. Centering on God's gift of love leads us to identify caverns hollowed-out by anger and places parched by the absence of love. The Season of Lent knows so fully about all of this. Technique or process or strategy or political change or social revolution will not alone confront the anger of our age. The fullness of the love of God in Jesus Christ—crucified and risen—does. The love, mercy, and grace of God fills the hollow left by the wreckage of our age. This world desperately needs messengers of this love and hope.

Notes

1 CBC News, "Front Burner" podcast, aired on August 6, 2019.

2 <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/meet-the-press/deep-boiling-anger-nbc-wsj-poll-finds-pessimistic-america-despite-n1045916>, accessed on September 12, 2019.

3 C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (Harper San Francisco, 1979), 102.

4 Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle* (Picador Press Edition, 2000), 79.

5 <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4859208>, accessed August 28, 2019.

6 Thank you to Scott Black Johnston for bringing this song back to mind (along with Ken Burns's documentary on Country Music) in a church newsletter, September 27, 2019.

7 Sermon preached at Princeton Seminary Chapel on September 27, 2019, by Craig Barnes.

8 Ibid.