

iBoil

Ephesians 4:26-27 ¹

The topic of this morning's iMessage is anger. Our text is simple and to the point, and you no doubt know it already. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "*In your anger do not sin*": *Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold*" (Ephesians 4:26-27).

Our discussion needs to begin with the realization that anger is not a bad thing in itself. Anger is God-given emotional pain that is rather similar to the experience of physical pain—it tells us that something is wrong and needs to be corrected. Anger is nearly always secondary to fear, and is an emotion we feel when we perceive something we value to be in danger. Because we generally become physiologically angry before we become consciously aware of our anger, we don't usually choose to *become* angry. Our problems come when we choose to remain angry.

Jesus was angry when He drove the merchants out of the temple courts (Matthew 21:12-13). The crucial thing to notice, though, is that Jesus was angry about sin, unbelief, and the exploitation of others. Jesus did not get angry when He himself was insulted or hurt, praying instead, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*" (Luke 23:34; 1 Peter 2:23). In this, as in most things, you and I tend to do the opposite of what Jesus would do: we're far more likely to be angry about what we perceive as personal injuries of one sort or another than we are to be angry about what is being done to other people.

Because anger reveals what we deeply fear losing, and therefore identifies what we truly value, anger can teach us more about ourselves than can almost any other emotion . . . if we choose to learn from our anger. But choosing to learn from anger requires some getting used to, since many of us begin with the idea that anger is to be feared and avoided.

Because anger is a part of all close relationships, our first learning about anger took place in our families of origin. As we watched our parents deal with their anger, we learned that acknowledging and expressing anger is either acceptable or unacceptable. We learned to think that anger is either normal or abnormal, helpful or dangerous. And, whether we knew it or not, we learned to deal with our own anger by doing what our parents did with theirs: discussing it with the persons involved; dumping it on anyone within reach; letting it ooze out in passive-aggressive behavior; or internalizing it (and often becoming ill as a result).

Now the truth is that anger and appropriately-managed conflict are some of our main doorways into relationships that last. Successfully-managed conflict leads to stronger, more stable, and more durable relationships. And, because soul-satisfying relationships are what God intends for us, God provides a great many opportunities for us to work on them.

As long as there are other people in the world, there are going to be some people whom we find difficult. When I find myself frustrated with someone else's behavior, I find it helpful to remember that I, too, am somebody's "difficult person," at least part of the time.

It also helps me to remember that nobody starts out trying to be difficult. We're all trying to get our needs met, and we have various understandings—and misunderstandings—about what our needs are and about what will meet them. Previous life experience has given some of us the proper tools to get our needs met, but others of us have tools that don't work very well. As one wit observed, "When all you've got is a hammer, all the world's a nail!"

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on August 26, 2012.

One of the many beautiful things about being a member of the Body of Christ is that our relationships in the church give us plenty of opportunity to work on our interpersonal skills. God is quite aware that our first response to interpersonal pain is usually to blame each other, saying to each other in one way or another that “**YOU** are the reason that **I** am unhappy.” Our instinctive response—and our fundamental mistake—is nearly always to try to change another person rather than examining ourselves (cp. Matthew 7:3).

Arthur Boers has suggested that “while we are tempted to label others as having spiritual problems, the real challenge is to recognize the opportunity for spiritual growth that we have in the face of difficult behavior.”² Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that “True Christian community is found in the place where the person you like least to be with always is,”³ and Henri Nouwen reminded us that “The one you least want to live with is the one who reminds you of that part of yourself that is most wounded and most in need of healing.”⁴

We experience anger when we experience what we perceive to be danger or when we experience hurt of one sort or another. And when we’re hurt, we find ourselves needing to do something with that hurt. Further, if we go to church at all, we’re well aware that offering forgiveness to those who hurt us represents the very heart of the Good News of Jesus. Forgiveness offered and received is central to Christian faith.

Even though we know this in our heads, I suspect that most of us know a lot more about standing in need of forgiveness than we know about the power to forgive. Forgiveness is difficult. It is not for the faint of heart.

When wrong is done to us, or to persons or to institutions or causes that we love, our relationship with the perpetrators of this wrong is fractured, if not completely shattered. While we know that Jesus told us to love our enemies and to forgive our offenders times without number, this is much easier to say than it is to actually do (Matthew 18:22).

We say the words, “I forgive you,” but many times we say the words long before they have become real. Such premature speaking may in fact short-circuit much of the spiritual power that the Cross of Jesus released into the world, robbing our lives and our churches of much that God would give us.

Professor Lewis Smedes helped me greatly when he pointed out that forgiveness is really a four-step process.⁵ How long it takes to move through the process is determined by many variables, chief of which is the depth of the wound. Smedes’ four stages of forgiveness are HURT, HATE, HEALING, and COMING TOGETHER.

Persons who have been offended are frequently advised—especially in religious circles—to move directly from stage one to stage four, from “Hurt” to “Coming Together.” But far from producing forgiveness, such short-circuiting (which is really unintended denial, distortion, and dishonesty) leads instead to avoidance, to distancing from others, and to creeping spiritual impotence. All four stages must be honored if healing is to come.

The first stage, **HURT**, doesn’t need much explanation. Hurt is the visceral experience of being wounded, intentionally or unintentionally. Sometimes the wound is physical, sometimes it’s psychological or spiritual. Our physical responses to hurt may include anger, hyperventilation, avoidance, flight, fight, etc.

² Arthur Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999), p. 15.

³ Quoted by David Augsburg in Boers, p. vi.

⁴ Boers, p. 120.

⁵ Lewis Smedes, *Forgive & Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve* (HarperOne, 1996).

The second stage quickly follows the initial experience of hurt. The second stage is surprising, but essential. The second stage of forgiveness is **HATE**.

Hate involves our nearly instinctive desire to hurt back. Hate brings with it the desire to inflict pain even beyond that which we ourselves have suffered. Our goal as Christians is not to nurse our hate, but rather to acknowledge it and allow it to speak, which it must do if real forgiveness is ever to follow.

Think of a deep wound to your leg, through the flesh and all the way to the bone. If a surgeon simply sutured the wound shut without cleansing the wound all the way to its depths, horrible, life-threatening infection would follow. The forgiveness of grievous wounds is a lot like that. Forgiveness will not be complete if it fails to penetrate the depth of the wound. The acknowledgement of hatred and anger takes us to that darkest place.

When we are in this second stage we often ruminate about the offense. We have a hard time thinking about anything else. We avoid the other person, and we may fantasize about what we'd like to do to them. When the offense comes into our minds, we feel hot anger. Our heart rates increase. We may clench our fists.

Healing must be powerful enough to deal with all of this intensity. Superficial statements of "it doesn't matter" or quick statements of forgiveness do not get to the bottom of the wound. This stage can last quite a long time.

The third stage of forgiveness, **HEALING**, is the longest stage. After we've experienced the darkness for a time—and it is sometimes a long, long time—we begin to be aware of another Presence beside us in our pain. If we open our suffering as best we can to this Holy Spirit of God, we are gradually enabled to view our afflictors through "softer eyes," and the third stage, an "Inner Healing" begins.

Forgiveness does not require "acting as though it didn't happen," because while trust is easily destroyed, it is not easily rebuilt. If our relationship with the offender ever returns to a place of great trust, that restoration is significantly dependent on the offender's willingness to behave in trustworthy ways. Still, such proof requires that we grant the offender some opportunity to prove trustworthy.

We don't let our guard down entirely, but we do let it down enough to permit small demonstrations of trustworthiness. When we're with the offender, we don't give him or her "the silent treatment," but are as courteous and kind as we can manage. While we don't protect the offender from the natural and appropriate consequences of the offense, neither do we try to augment or supplement her or his pain.

In this third stage, we're past the intensity of our own pain and have entered a time of relative emptiness. We may quietly discover that our anger has subsided, and we may feel little or nothing when the wound comes into our minds. We may feel sadness. We may no longer avoid the offender, but we have little interest in being with him or her. As God's Spirit continues to work in us—sometimes over a period of many years—we begin to see our offender through God's eyes.

We begin to sense his or her own pain and brokenness, out of which our own wound was inflicted. We begin to be able to pray just the tiniest bit for this person's healing. We begin to think of him or her with growing compassion rather than with anger or hatred. We no longer experience physiological changes when the offense comes to mind.

As God continues to grant us the mind of Christ, we eventually find ourselves able to say with our Lord, “Father, forgive them, because they don’t know what they are doing.”⁶

Finally, we find that we are able to “put our end of the rope down,” no longer feeling any need to tug or pull against the offender. We can walk away from the wound into the future, continuing to pray for God’s healing and blessing in the offender’s life. While we may think of the wound when seeing this other person, we do not ever bring it up again except as an expression of thanks for God’s healing.

As our healing becomes complete, we become able to invite the offender to restore the relationship at some level—the final **COMING TOGETHER**. This fourth stage of forgiveness depends as much on the offender as on the offended. Forgiveness, like grace, must be received.

The truth is that “Coming Together” may or may not happen. Coming together has to do with reconciliation, with spoken forgiveness, which we can offer by God’s grace with or without repentance on the other person’s part, even as Jesus did from the Cross.

Sometimes the other person is dead by the time we ourselves get to this point. Sometimes they have become unavailable in other ways, such as through dementia or distance. Our own final release sometimes comes through writing a letter offering forgiveness that we may or may not ever mail. Many people find it powerfully healing to burn such a letter as an act of sacrifice to God or to place it on the person’s grave.

The key to this whole process of working through our anger toward healing and possible reconciliation is that we choose to invite and to allow God to bring healing to our continuing pain. Let me offer several examples of how this works.

Gary Preston tells a story about a traveler journeying with a guide through the jungles of Southeast Asia. They came to a shallow river and waded through it, and as they did so, numerous leeches attached themselves to their torsos and legs. The traveler’s first instinct was to grab the leeches and pull them off, but the guide stopped him, warning that pulling the leeches off would break their teeth off under the skin, leading to infection. The guide said that the way to get rid of the leeches was to bathe in warm balsam water, and the leeches would let go on their own.

Gary continued, “When I’ve been significantly injured by another person, I cannot simply yank the injury from myself and expect that all bitterness, malice, and emotion will be gone. Resentment still hides under the surface. The only way to become truly free of the offense and to forgive others is to bathe in the soothing bath of God’s forgiveness of me. When I finally fathom the extent of God’s love in Jesus Christ, forgiveness of others is a natural outflow.”⁷

Another Gary, Gary Sinclair, told about an auto accident his mother-in-law experienced in the days before seat belts and safety glass. The accident threw her into the windshield, and some of the tiny pieces of glass became embedded deep in her face. The pieces of glass didn’t hurt while they were deep in her flesh, but one by one, over a period of years, they made their way to the surface of her skin. Each eruption of a shard was very painful, though it was necessary for final healing.⁸

⁶ A very powerful treatment of this process can be experienced by reading William Young’s autobiographical novel, *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Windblown Media, 2007).

⁷ Gary Preston, *Character Forged from Conflict* (Bethany House, 1999).

⁸ Gary Sinclair, Mahomet, Illinois. www.preachingtoday.com

Even after the worst pain of an offense has passed, and after the process of forgiveness has brought great healing to the relationship, there are almost always shards of pain still lodged deep in our spirits, outside of our awareness. Later—sometimes much later—that person may do or say something that is innocent in itself, but that touches this deep pain. Then, once again, we must make a choice.

This happened to me several years ago. I was in a conversation with someone with whom I had experienced ancient and considerable pain, but with whom I have also experienced great healing. This person made a comment that was not intended to hurt, but that still triggered pain that surprised me by its intensity. Knowing that no harm was intended, I chose to let the words drop, not even commenting on them. The pain continued for a day or so, but then subsided, as another shard was released to God.

Such moments on the journey of forgiveness remind me of the old Gospel Song, “I Must Tell Jesus”

I must tell Jesus all of my trials; I cannot bear these burdens alone.
In my distress He kindly will help me; He ever loves and cares for His own.

*I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus! I cannot bear my burdens alone;
I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus! Jesus can help me, Jesus alone.*

I must tell Jesus all of my troubles; He is a kind, compassionate Friend.
If I but ask Him, He will deliver, Make of my troubles quickly an end.

*I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus! I cannot bear my burdens alone;
I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus! Jesus can help me, Jesus alone.*

O how the world to evil allures me! O how my heart is tempted to sin!
I must tell Jesus, and He will help me over the world the vict'ry to win.

*I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus! I cannot bear my burdens alone;
I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus! Jesus can help me, Jesus alone.⁹*

⁹ “I Must Tell Jesus,” words and music by Elisha Hoffman, 1893.