

It is better to fold your hands together and pray than to clench your fists.

Matthew 5:21-26

We Sometimes Get Angry!

[ppt] What do you see on the screen? A happy couple.... But don't be fooled by the picture and assume that your pastor has a perfect relationship with his wife. When do you generally take a picture? We generally take a picture when we are happy. That's why you may hardly find an angry face in your family pictures. This picture shows how Juhee and I look when we are happy. But in reality, just like all other couples, sometimes, Juhee and I argue and fight with one another. Especially, in the first year of our marriage, sometimes, we yelled at each other. I know this may surprise you... but... a pastor is also a sinful human being who needs everyday mercy from God and from his wife just like all husbands do.

When Juhee and I had just gotten married, a pastor, a good friend of mine, gave us some very important advice. He didn't say, "love each other dearly" but he said, "fight well." "Fight well...?" I didn't understand why he said that because at that moment, I felt that I really really loved Juhee and would never fight with her. But, he knew that conflicts within relationships are inevitable and they aren't necessarily bad things.

To fight well, Juhee and I made two simple rules of engagement by following apostle Paul's teaching. In his letter to Ephesians, Apostle Paul says, "don't sin by letting anger control you." Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil." (Ephesians 4:26-27) Following Paul's words, Juhee and I agreed "Don't say any bad words even if we are angry" and "Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry." We keep these rules quite well. The only problem is that we sometimes fought at night... so we try to solve our issue before the sun comes up.

I have to admit that I sometime get angry. When my computer suddenly froze and I was not able to recover the term paper I had almost finished, I got angry. When I had to wake up in the middle of night three times a week because of noisy upstairs neighbors, I got angry. When a crazy driver greeted me by raising his middle figure, I got angry. When I heard news about politicians demonizing vulnerable immigrants and the inhumane practice of family separation at the US-Mexico border, I got angry. We have witnessed so many mass shootings yet nothing has really changed and we get angry. We, sometimes... hopefully not all the time... get angry.

Anger itself is not a bad thing. Anger is a natural and inevitable response to frustration or stress and it has some benefits. According to psychological research about anger, "people reported that they tended to be much happier after yelling at an offending party. They felt relieved, more optimistic about the future, more energized"¹ after they expressed their anger. I bet you have had similar experiences. Also, if anger is properly channeled, righteous outrage can be an powerful impulse for social change like Martin Luther King jr. had.

If so, is it o.k to get angry? [ppt] America is an angry place right now. Anger has become the dominant emotion in our politics and society. Right? Republicans are angry at Democrats while Democrats are angry at Republicans.

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/01/charles-duhigg-american-anger/576424/>

Not only our politics, but also we, United Methodists, are now angry at each other. Progressives are angry at traditionalists calling, “you rotten sinners. How could you exclude your brothers and sisters from the church?” Traditionalists also are angry with progressives calling them, “you rotten sinners! How dare you to stand against the authority of the Bible and distort its teachings?” We are angry. We are angry. This is the reality we live in today.

Some say, “anger is one of the densest forms of communication and it conveys more information, more quickly, than almost any other type of emotion.”² So anger among Methodists is not necessarily a bad thing since it can foster conversation between different groups. But my question is “What is the line that we shouldn’t cross when we are angry... especially when we are angry with our brothers and sisters in Christ?”

Don’t get angry?

In today’s scripture, Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 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.” Jesus is saying that insults spoken in anger are the moral equivalent of murder.

Have you ever said “you idiot or you moron” to anyone in your lifetime? Then, you are in trouble. If we literally apply this teaching to ourselves, I don’t know how many of us would actually be exempt from the hell of fire. It seems that Jesus strictly forbids anger and insults toward our brothers and sisters.

But as we know, Jesus also got angry. In Mark chapter 3, Jesus asked the religious leaders if it was okay to heal a person on the Sabbath day. When they would not answer, the Bible says, "he looked around at them with anger" (Mark 3:5) before healing a man. In Matthew chapter 23, he’s pretty angry at the religious leaders and shouted, “You blind fools!” After telling us not to call people fools, Jesus called religious leaders ‘blind fools!’ How do we understand his contradictory action?

First, Jesus didn’t forbid all anger. Actually, Jesus had what scholars call “prophetic rage” or “righteous anger,” which is a necessary response to injustice in our society such as poverty, escalating militarism, racism or any other forms of discrimination and oppression. Jesus is simply doing what prophets have always done: calling those in power to task and working for justice. He’s “punching up, not punching down.” Christian’s anger needs to be righteous rage that protects and empowers the vulnerable and the marginalized rather than blindly supporting the agendas of people in power.

But even moral outrage must be closely managed, or it can do more harm than good. Rage is like a fire, so if it is not properly managed, anger becomes a cycle of recrimination, rumination, ever-expanding fury and revenge impulse. It devastates our relationships and often

² Ibid.

ends up with demonizing others. Sadly, this is what is going on now in our society and our beloved denomination.

Reconciliation

So... How can we have righteous anger without falling into the destructive cycle of fury and the revenge impulse? We must remember that the ultimate goal of prophetic rage is not eliminating those who hold opposite views but reconciliation.

Jesus said, “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” (v. 23-24)

To reconcile with our brothers and sisters, we never give up our willingness to love and embrace each other. That’s what Jesus has done on the cross.

[ppt] This cross is a “reconciliation cross.” What do you see in this cross.



Two persons embracing one another. On the cross, God, the Father, embraced sinful human beings and their enmity for God. God first came to us and embraced us, not because we are worthy of his embrace or we repent of our sins. Rather, God embraces our sins, our brokenness, and enmity for God in Him. In this way, God reconciles us with Godself in Jesus.

Even though we don’t always agree with each other, don’t lose your willingness to love and embrace your brothers and sisters so we can continue to be one happy Asbury family. In this divisive time, I hope that Asbury become a model church of reconciliation in which no one gives up on their love for one another despite our differences.

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Of course, embracing those who are radically different from us is a difficult task. But we can do it with our two hands. Our hands often represent our emotions. When someone insults us and makes us angry, we clench our hands into fists. The fist is the hardest form of our hands. It represents aggressiveness, a willingness to fight back and take revenge. But there is something that you cannot do while clenching your fists. You cannot fold your hands together. When you fold your hands together, they turn into praying hands. These praying hands give us humility as well as love. They give us strength to forgive those who trespass against us and they also give us the courage to apologize for our trespasses against others. We can also hold another's hands only when we unfold our clenched fists. Reconciliation begins when we hold each other's hands.

If there is someone you still cannot forgive, unfold your clenched fists and fold your hands to pray. Ask for God's mercy and grace. Ask God to strengthen you to forgive and if you hurt someone, ask God to give you the courage to apologize.

Hold each other's hands and feel the warmth of the others' hands. That warmth, no matter how feeble it is, will melt the cold wall that divides us and make us one body of Christ. Let us reconcile with one another. Let us continue to love and embrace one another. Our Christ will make us one in love. Amen.