

“I’m Angry Today”
Luke 13:1-9
February 28, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings
It's easy to get angry, but what kind of angry are we?

I've confessed before that anger is a problem for me. That might surprise some of you because you've never seen me angry. And it's rare that I do get angry. Or rather I should say that it is rare that I show anger. In fact, on one or two memorable occasions when I got angry with my children, it was such a novel thing for them when I raised my voice that they broke out in laughter. But I do get angry.

Everyone does. And it seems today that anger is very much in vogue. There seem to be a lot of angry people around today. You just have to watch our political discourse and you find anger everywhere.

“Our country is being run by incompetent people,” Donald Trump has said, “and I won’t be angry when we fix it, but until we fix it, I’m very, very angry.” Bernie Sanders has also said, “I am angry.

The American people are angry.” And if you watch these debates and the rallies it appears that there are a lot of angry people around.

Are you angry? I am. The events of the last week have made me angry. That a man can drive around Kalamazoo and indiscriminately shoot six people to death makes me angry. The fact that we seemed to have no idea what could set him off like that and that he could have as many guns as he wants makes me angry. That a man could just a few days later shoot people in Hesston, Kansas, because he was angry makes me angry. That it keeps happening over and over again and we seem to be paralyzed for what to do makes me angry. It's the NRA's fault, it's the Democrat's fault, it's the fault of the congress, it's the fault of the president, it's the fault of the loss of moral values, it's because we have the wrong moral values, it's the fault of all of us. I'm just indiscriminately angry when it comes to things like this.

But let's be clear. It's not a bad thing to be angry. Anger is an emotion, and as such I think it is morally neutral. It's not bad to be angry, it's not necessarily good either. Anger unleashes energy that helps us change things. But what do you do when you are, angry? Are you a yeller? Do you raise your voice? Or do you sit and seethe? Do you plot revenge? Those may change things, but does that anger change

in constructive ways, or is it destructive? Does it tear things down or transform them into something new? What do you do when you get angry with those you love?

In today's lesson from Luke some people come up to Jesus and tell him about an atrocity that has happened in Jerusalem. Although we don't have any other accounts of this event, it seems that some Galileans were in Jerusalem presenting their sacrifices in the temple and some sort of dispute arose between them and the Roman authorities. Was it over taxes? Was it over the presence of Rome in that holy place? We have no idea, but we know that Roman soldiers killed some of the Galileans there in the temple. People were angry. That caused the fight in the first place and now people were angry over the sacrilege of violence in the Temple. Some people think that religious people shouldn't get angry, but people of faith are human just like everyone else and so they get angry. The people that came up to Jesus were obviously angry about what had happened. Jesus himself gets angry at times, we only have to look at the time he threw the money changers out of the Temple to see an example of that. But I have to admit that it has disturbed me that during this election cycle it seems that some of the angriest people are those who are people of faith. People of faith can get angry, but it is not faith that makes them angry. Currently I'm reading Karen Armstrong's book called "Fields of Blood" in which she talks about the prevalence of religious bloodshed, people killed in the name of God. One of the common myths she debunks is one that we still often hear, that religion is the cause of more wars and death through the centuries than anything else. That's just not true. One need only look at the 20th century, by far the most violent in human history and the millions killed through those years died because of economics or military expansion or political power but few because of religious faith. But people of faith can get angry. But what happens then?

Jesus tells the story of the man whose tree does not bear fruit and so in anger he orders the gardener to cut it down. But the gardener has a different plan. Anger should give us energy to change things. But does it do that, or just give us energy to destroy. The Rev. Amy Butler at Riverside Church in New York suggest that there are really two kinds of anger: the kind that is the fruit of our own egos, and the

other kind, that is focused outward, on the injustice of the world. In a sermon, she said, “Either our instinctual response to threat is all about us—who we are, what we want, what we need—or it becomes about something bigger than ourselves.”¹ That's what I try to think about when I get angry. Am I angry because I'm not getting what I want? Or am I angry because the poor of the world are being ignored? Am I angry because I feel unsafe? Or am I angry because everyone in our community should be safe? We are careful with anger because anger can turn to wrath and we remember that wrath is one of the seven deadly sins. When anger turns to wrath, the desire for change turns into a desire for vengeance. Anger is God's way of inspiring us to turn a fallen world into something new, with righteousness as the result. But Wrath turns inward and serves only the self. I want vengeance because it will make me feel better. Wrath is self-centered and uncaring, it wants what it wants and it doesn't care who gets hurt. That is why wrath is one of the seven deadly sins, because it can lead easily to wounding another, physically or emotionally, with fist or with words. Wrath leads to murder, destruction, and war. Speak what we will of the “wrath of God,” this is not what God wants.

When we get involved in political discourse this year, or when we watch a debate, or when we see a crowd at a rally, or when we are part of one of those crowds and we see anger, we would do well to ask if that anger is self-centered or other centered. Is the person angry because they are not getting what they want? Or are they angry because they want the world to change for the benefit of all.

You remember the old Hebrew story about how Abraham was sitting outside his tent one evening when he saw an old man, wearing from age and a long journey, coming toward him. Because hospitality to the stranger is one of the highest virtues in Semitic culture, Abraham rushed out, greeted him and then invited him into his tent. There he washed the old man's feet and gave him food and drink.

The old man immediately began eating without saying any kind of prayer or blessing. So Abraham asked him, “Don't you worship God?”

The old traveler replied, “I worship only fire, and reverence no other god.” When Abraham heard this,

¹ Quoted in “Year of the Angry Voter,” Jennifer Finney Boylan, NYT, Feb. 11, 2016.

he became incensed, grabbed the old man by his shoulders, and threw him out of his tent into the cold night air. When the old man had left, God called to his friend Abraham and asked where the stranger was. Abraham replied, "I threw him out because he did not worship you."

God answered, "I have suffered him these eighty years although he dishonors me. Could you not endure him one night?"

Jesus calls us to be like the gardener. When we are angry or frustrated, not to cut things down, not to throw them away, not to turn on each other, but to nurture. Is that what we do when we get angry with those we love? Do we tear them down, like cutting down a tree? Do we desert them, abandon them because they have angered or hurt us or because we disagree? Or do we nurture them, inspire change, talk with them, walk with them through the problem, even though we may be on different sides?

How do we handle it when we disagree with someone at church? What if someone here hurts you or makes you angry? Do we talk with those we differ from, or do we find those who agree with us so we can have someone on our side? Part of the challenge of being in a community of faith is the challenge of holy relationships. We are connected to one another, we all have been adopted into the same family, we are part of one another. Cutting one another off is like cutting down the tree in the garden. Fruitful relationships come through nurture and love, even when we disagree. This is not the way the world works, is it? We're not supposed to be in holy relationship with people we disagree with, who make us angry, who do things that hurt us. We're all supposed to retreat to our own sides, Democrat, Republican, liberal, conservative, pro-this, anti-that, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jew, Hindu—political divisions, divisions of class, or skin color or religion—let's just associate with people who are like us. But God tells us different. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts," says the Lord through the prophet. We are supposed to live differently from the world around us. We are supposed to be counter-cultural. We are supposed to nurture and treasure those who make us angry and don't agree with us. We're not all supposed to

agree. But we're supposed to love.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel has said, "Intolerance lies at the core of evil. Not the intolerance that results from any threat or danger. But intolerance of another being who dares to exist. Intolerance without cause. It is so deep within us, because every human being secretly desires the entire universe to himself. Our only way out is to learn compassion without cause. To care for each other simply because that 'other' exists." I don't know why someone would shoot other people. Maybe the rabbi is right, that desire to have the universe be ours and no one else's. My way or no way. That's the kind of intolerance and anger that makes God weep. I'm angry about things that have happened. I hope you are too. But is it anger that breaks down? Or anger that helps transform the world?