

Southminster Presbyterian Church 6/27/10

Psalm 137

Mark 11:12-14, 20-21

“Tasks of Grief: Anger”

Rev. Joe Ripley

This morning we continue our exploration of our response to grief. There are copies on the table outside or from the church’s website. We’ve talked so far about shock & denial and bargaining with God. This morning we’re going to talk about the difficult issue of anger.

Is anger ever an appropriate response, particularly for us as Christ’s ambassadors ? Or is anger a negative emotion, one that we would be better off, particularly as nice church-going folks, not expressing? After all, didn’t Jesus teach, “If you are even angry with your brother or sister, you are liable to the same judgment as a murderer” ? What do you think?

Let’s start by recognizing that anger is a normal, predictable, expected response to grief. It simply is. Like all emotions, it is not something we can control. At least not directly. Messages, “you shouldn’t think that, say that, or feel that way,” reveal more about the discomfort of someone else in the presence of anger, than it is helpful to the person feeling angry.

Anger is a non-thinking, gut-level reaction, driven by past situations and circumstances. Like Alexander, and his “horrible, terrible, very bad day” with the Children’s Time, we simply feel how we feel.

Clearly, the writer of the Psalm was driven by anger. Perhaps they were bitter about ways their own attitudes and actions might have contributed to the destruction of Jerusalem. It certainly seems that Jesus’ anger at the fig tree was completely misplaced, given that it was too early in the season for there to be figs.

Let me be clear: not all ways of expressing anger are OK. Lashing out at others, emotionally or physically is never how God wants us to act. No person of faith should use the Psalm as a justification to abuse others (not even our enemies).

Does this imply that anger should merely be tolerated, the same way we tolerate tornadoes and the indignity of aging: something we can’t do anything about ? You know, merely a sign of the broken, fallen world in which we are forced to live ? Or, is there, a positive, constructive side, of anger ? What do you think ?

I think there is. Anger is a source of energy. If we are angry enough about the way things currently are, it motivates us to do something about it. Anger helps translate disappointment and frustration into positive change for the future.

It was anger over the death of a loved one that resulted in Mothers Against Drunk Driving being organized. It was anger over the mistreatment of people of color that drove us to adopt Civil Rights and Voting Rights laws, and helped to end apartheid in South Africa. Anger helped the Psalmist find the energy to return to Jerusalem and rebuild a more just society.

However, anger, even when focused at someone or something else, is always about something inside of us. Some hurt, some disappointment, some brokenness or unresolved issue, some fear. Something we've done or that was done to us, often before we could protect ourselves. Anger can be a sign of our need to take a more realistic look at ourselves and our understanding of the world. And I'm sure this weekend at *Summerfest* Roger Daltry sang in his snarl to action, "We won't be fooled again!"

One problem with anger is inhibits our ability for rational thought. We can become trapped in the unthinking reactivity, rather than look inside ourselves and thoughtful reflect on the underlying cause of our anger. It is so much safer to direct anger elsewhere, placing blame and therefore responsibility, on someone else, than it is to feel the emptiness and loneliness that comes when we face our grief. So it is easy for some people to become stuck in anger, lashing out disproportionately and bitterly, for years and years.

Working through the tasks of anger is much more complicated when the anger is legitimate and justified. For instance, when a loved one did not stop smoking, and ends up with lung cancer. Or when someone or some system failed us. Or when our anger results from someone being violated, such as a crime or abuse.

So how can we, as God's people, help someone sort through the uncomfortable tasks of anger ? Given everything we have to do this morning, we don't have time to finish this. So, come back next week, and we will think about how we can assist folks working through the tasks of anger in grief.