

Southminster Presbyterian Church 7/4/10

Jonah 4:1-5

Ephesians 4:25-32

The Tasks of Grief: Anger II

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This morning we continue to explore how we can assist in God's healing of grief. If you've missed some of our earlier discussions, there are copies on the table outside or from the church's website. Last week, we concluded that anger, even though scary and uncomfortable, is not only a normal human response, but anger can also be God's gift: energizing us when we are paralyzed by grief, moving us forward on the path to healing. So this morning we want to explore how we can help someone work through the tasks of anger.

1- The first healing thing we can do is name anger. As the writer of Ephesians says, "Let us speak the truth." We can verbalize that someone is mad. "Boy you sound really teed off." Sometimes the person may not even be aware in their grief that they are angry. When we do not recognize that we are feeling angry it is easy to believe that "someone has it in for us," or is going out of their way to intentionally upset us. Often, once we realize that we are feeling angry, we can move past blame and become curious about the underlying reasons for our anger.

Frequently, anger is connected to issues of hurt. Where we have been wounded or embarrassed this often gets expressed as anger. When someone treats us carelessly, like cutting us off in traffic, our knee-jerk reaction is often anger. Where we have doubts about our self-worth, we're afraid that someone else acting this way is confirming our worst fears. So, rather than merely revealing something about the other person, namely they are clueless or care-less, we respond to our hurt with anger.

Where we recognize the signs of hurt in anger, we can open deeper exploration by affirming there is nothing wrong with those feelings and help someone realize that they are feeling angry.

2- The second healing thing we can do is to hang in there. We can remain non-judgmental about someone's anger. "Speaking only what is useful for building up." If we believe anger is wrong, or worse yet, un-Christian, it is easy to send the message, "you shouldn't feel that way." However, someone feeling guilty about being angry is, to say the least, unhelpful.

Let's be honest, when someone is really upset and angry, our normal, natural tendency is..... get as far away from them as we can. Certainly it is safer for us: we don't want to wind up the object of someone's anger. There is also the "pile

on” response, “I know, if you’re mad about that, wait until you hear about this, that or the other.” Also, it is easy to take refuge in defensiveness, forgetting this anger is about someone else, and react in self-righteousness: “How dare them ! I’ve done nothing wrong.”

However, as God’s people, part of one body, we are invited to act differently. Rather than retreat, or defensiveness or fanning the flame of anger, we are invited to “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another.” To be vulnerable, to be our brother’s and sister’s keeper, standing in when someone we care about is angry. As anger is expressed, its power lessened, and God’s healing power is released. Otherwise, people can hold grudges and remain, as Jonah was, trapped in anger.

Let me be clear: this is not an invitation to be bludgeoned by someone’s anger. That is a form of abuse. But where we recognize someone who is angry as hurting and in need of help, it may make it easier for us to not take in personally, since it really is about them. It takes courage and love to be vulnerable and not get hooked by the anger of others, “never returning evil for evil.”

3- The third healing thing we can do when someone is expressing anger in grief, is to help them explore the reasons, the hurt behind the anger. It is normal to blame anger on another person or situation. I think the psychological term for this is “kicking-the-dog.” That more descriptive than “transference.”

The boss’ bonus is cut, so he criticizes you, you come home and yell at your spouse, they snap at one of the kids, and they having fewer options for dealing with anger, turn around and kick the dog. Do you think that Jonah was truly upset that God is gracious and merciful, giving us second and third and fourth chances, exactly like the kind that he himself received ? God doesn’t dismiss or reject or condemn Jonah, but engages him, asking, “Why should you be angry?”

The doctor isn’t causing the cancer, or making it very difficult to treat. The Administrative Commission isn’t creating pointless, unnecessary hoops for Southminster to jump through. The Interim Pastor isn’t trying to destroy the church or delaying the start of the search for the new pastor. What is the hidden hurt here at Southminster, finding its way out expressed as anger ?

The pastor of a congregation in Montana divorced his wife of 20 years, and took a job in another state. So the ex-pastor’s ex-wife was mad. She had lost her sense of identity, she had to move into a much smaller house, she had to go back to full-time work, and her future of secure retirement was shattered. She had many legitimate reasons to be angry.

Instead, Susan focused all of her hurt and frustration on the next pastor. Any guesses on who that was ? Unfortunately, it happened to be me. It should be no surprise that I was not able to help her recognize the underlying reason for her anger. However, what was tragic was that no one else in the congregation was willing to confront Susan, helping her recognize that her anger was misplaced, until my ministry there was seriously damaged.

Often as someone's anger is affirmed and legitimized, they are more free to move past their anger. We can gently point out how the situation looks to us. "You say that are angry about this, is that what you are really angry about ?" Or speak for ourselves, "If that had happened to me, this is what I might be really mad about." We can ask questions, gently exploring for the hurt behind the anger

Anger can be damaging and destructive: to others, to ourselves, to God's body, particularly as we stay trapped there. As agents of God's healing, reconciling love, "marked with a seal for redemption," we can: recognize and help others name their anger, give them a safe place to express their anger, and encourage new insights into the hurts behind their anger. Therefore, "giving grace to everyone who hears." Come back next week, and we will continue to explore grief, as we take up the tasks of sadness.