

## Seven Deadly Sins: Anger

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Mark 3:1-6

There were maybe 350 people participating in one of two Ash Wednesday services on Wednesday. I walked forward to have the ashes imposed on my forehead. I heard the words spoken over Christians for centuries, “Dust you are, to dust you shall return.” I looked around at all the foreheads...each one marked by a cross-shaped dust. I was reminded that all of you are dust and that you will return to dust. There was the visible reminder on your forehead. But, then I came home from the Ash Wednesday service and looked in the mirror and there on my forehead was cross-shaped dust, reminding me that I am dust, that I am returning to dust, reminding me of my mortality, my sin.

There is nothing better than a mirror to remind us what we look like. Our Lenten series will be on the 7 deadly sins. We will talk about anger, greed, sloth, lust, envy and pride. But that is only 6 of the 7. That’s because there are 6 Sundays in Lent. And the purpose of reflection on the 7 deadly sins is not primarily on the number 7. The purpose is to look into the mirror of these sins and see our own dustiness etched on our foreheads. The purpose is to take a look in the mirror and see your own mortality, frailty and sin. This week we consider the deadly sin of anger. As I read the passage listen for two kinds of anger in this story.

In our passage we see the Pharisees are angry. Their silence is a thin disguise of their anger that goes out and plots how to kill Jesus. Here we see a direct link between the anger in the hearts of the Pharisees to their plot to kill Jesus. Anger in the heart is linked to murder. That is why Jesus says, “*You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.*” 22 *But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.*” (Matt 5:21-22). Whoever is angry receives the same judgment as the one who commits murder.

We all know that anger is bad when it becomes ugly and violent – abusive husband hitting his wife, a white supremacist driving his car into a crowd of people, a group of angry shoppers on black Friday. Calvin College professor, Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, is the author of a book about the 7 deadly sins entitled, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies*. In the chapter on anger she calls anger what it is – “Hellish Passion.” She’s not overstating the damage caused by anger. By Jesus’ definition – the abusive husband, abusive parent, and angry torch carrying white men in Charlottesville are murders. Anger is bad. Anger is destructive. Anger is a hellish passion.

Why? How can an emotion be as destructive as murder? In her book, Dr. Konyndyk DeYoung introduces readers to John Cassian, an early church Father, 400 A.D. He believed and taught that any “*anger twists any real concern about sin or injustice into service of the self – protecting our own ego, ... feeding our own reputations for righteousness instead of admitting our complicity.*” Here’s what John Cassian says that wrath boils over and blinds the eyes of the heart. There are at least three ways that our vision is obstructed by anger. First, we become blind to our own sin, and we inflate our self-righteousness. Second, we magnify the sins of others, particularly the person who offended us. Finally, anger prevents us from looking to Jesus and his righteousness, because we seek to justify ourselves. In other words anger turns Ash Wednesday into a service where I see only your sin, mortality, weakness... but I never look in the mirror to see that I have the same ashen cross to bear – my sin and misery.

My own anger was directed at the church. I had genuinely been hurt. And I expected the church to judge the sinner so that I could be proved right, and my enemy to be exposed. But the church offered grace to my enemy. And I became so angry. I know how anger has the power to return over and over to that moment of suffering, the moment of injustice - like watching a video on replay. Anger serves the self. It feeds the sense of self-righteousness in that situation. It soothes one's self-justification for not being gracious. It promotes self-interest in seeking revenge. Anger is a hellish passion when it serves the self, it turns from God.

But, you probably noticed that the Pharisees aren't the only angry people in this passage. Jesus himself is angry. In verse 5 we read that Jesus, "looked around at them in *anger* and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.'" Does this mean that not all anger is hellish? To answer that Dr. DeYoung turns to another theologian of the church, Thomas Aquinas. He agrees with John Cassian that anger is a hellish passion when it serves the self. But, he argued that the Bible also teaches that anger is not all bad. It also serves something good in us. Aquinas taught that anger is the human (and God's) response to injustice. In writing about Aquinas, Dr. Konyndyk DeYoung says that anger is both a "Hellish Passion" and also a "Holy Emotion." And to understand the difference, she says, we must consider Jesus.

In contrast to the blind anger of the Pharisees, Jesus' anger opens his eyes to the suffering around him. Jesus sees the suffering of the man with the crippled arm. And Jesus sees the angry hearts of the Pharisees. With his eyes open to all this suffering Jesus is "deeply distressed." I used to think that Jesus was angry the way I am and so this miracle was a way for him to demonstrate power over his enemies, to put them in their place. But, that's not what Mark is saying. The writer is using a word that refers to grief that comes from sympathy. Jesus performs this miracle because he has sympathy for the Pharisees. This miracle is a sign of the power of the Sabbath - to heal and to restore. Healing the lame man is a reflection of God's love. The healing is a sign that anger serving love leads to healing. Jesus means for the Pharisees to see the sign. He longs for the sign to lead the Pharisees to also be healed of anger. Jesus believes there is power in a sign to change a heart that is hard.

Anger is a "Holy Emotion" only when it serves love. But this sign isn't enough to transform the anger of the Pharisees. The Pharisees nurse their anger and refine their plan to kill Jesus. On Good Friday Jesus will hang on the cross and die. The Pharisees and their allies - priests, Sadducees and Herodians will stand around mocking. They had not changed their anger still served their self-interest, their self-righteousness. But even on the cross Jesus' anger serves his love when he says, "Father, forgive them." Forgive those who are angry, blind to suffering, and murderers. Forgive the self-righteous, self-justified, self-interested, "...for they don't know what they're doing." On the cross anger serves love.

On Ash Wednesday this past week, a woman joined thousands of other Christians to have sign of the cross imposed on her forehead in dust and ashes. She heard that it is a sign of her mortality and sin. She was reminded that Christ become one of us, even to the point of death. She was reminded that Jesus' sacrifice is a demonstration of his love. Those were the reflections she left church with. And then, later that day, to her horror, she rushed over to Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School. I don't know her name. I saw her picture. In the photo she's cradling another woman in her arms. The ashen cross was still visible on her forehead.

When I saw my sister in Christ weeping in the middle of all that anger and violence I wept. I wept for the children whose lives are not valued by our society. Some claim that the lives of babies are less valuable than the rights of mothers and fathers. Many of them who are scared and hopeless. Some people claim that the lives of school children are less valuable that

the rights of people who sell and purchase assault rifles. I wept angry tears of grief because that ashen cross on the forehead of our sister looked powerless to stop anger and violence.

Yet there she was. The sign of Jesus' humanity and his majesty on her forehead. There she was representing Christ who himself was the victim of self-righteous, violent men. She was there because she believed Jesus, who gave us a sign that death doesn't have the final word. And suddenly in that setting the cross on her forehead symbolized a kind of power.

It took me some time to calm down and realized that communion – like the miracle in our passage – is the sign of anger serving love. And this is the sign that Christ leaves for us. We do not seek strength from the weapons of this world. Jesus knew that we would have to follow him through this angry and violent world. And so he left us this communion as a sign of the power of his love. Through this sign the death and resurrection of Jesus nourishes our love for those who suffer – both innocent and the guilty. This communion opens our eyes to recognize the image of God in all people. This sign speaks the truth that there was a day when anger once served love perfectly. This sign strengthens our faith, hope and love. Amen.

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