
I'm Angry, But Why?

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Lent 3 – Year B

He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" John 2:16

"I was very angry with him."

This is the confession of Richard Gere's character in the 1990 romantic comedy "Pretty Woman." He is a wildly successful corporate raider. He is sharp and sophisticated, but he has a tired look that needs more than a good night's sleep.

While in Los Angeles on a deal, he mistakenly turns down Hollywood Boulevard, where he meets Julia Roberts. Well, the character played by Julia Roberts. She is hard up member of one of the world's oldest professions; no, she's not a doctor or a priest.

He hires her to give him directions to Beverly Hills, and then asks her to accompany him to several functions scheduled for the following week. Their relationship grows, as the liveliness of her wit begins to crack the hard shell of his anger. She introduces him to such sensual pleasures as watching reruns of "I Love Lucy."

"I was very angry with him," Gere says of the father to whom he has not spoken in fourteen years. "It cost me ten thousand dollars in therapy to say that sentence. I was very angry with him."

Julia Roberts has a different reaction, "I would have been very angry at the ten thousand dollars!"

We tend to see anger as something to be eliminated.

We associate it with road rage, universal gestures, violent outbursts, and depression. We worry that it can seem seductive and satisfying in the short term. But, we are convinced that it will always be destructive and dangerous in the long run.

Scripture seems to support this view.

James tells us to slow to speak and slow to anger, "for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." (James 1:19-20)

Paul tells us that we must get rid of things like anger once we have stripped off the old self and clothed ourselves with the new. (Colossians 3:8; Ephesians 4:26)

Jesus tells us that anger is as bad as murder. (Matthew 5:22)

Yet, there is more to it than that.

Jesus is clearly angry when he drives the merchants out of the Jerusalem Temple.

He doesn't just lose his temper. It's not as if he walked in and was shocked to find gambling going on there. Everyone is doing just what they always do, and there's no indication that anyone is being cheated.

It feels more like Jesus is purposely using his anger.

He has just performed his first miracle, graciously changing water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. But, when he gets to Jerusalem, he takes on the fiery demeanor of a prophet. He does what the prophets of Israel have always done -- something outrageous to get the attention of the crowd, and then something insightful to reveal the truth about what is happening around them.

Jesus is angry about the way God is being portrayed.

Jesus is trying to undue a system of sacrifice that requires death to gain God's favor. So, he makes it impossible for the pilgrims to worship God in the traditional way. They can't exchange their ordinary coins for the extraordinary temple currency, and they can't find the cattle, sheep, or doves that they will need for their burnt offerings. He interprets his act by appealing to the authority of scripture, quoting the prophet Zechariah in his admonition not to turn God's house into a marketplace.

This sacrificial mentality continues to be a temptation for us today.

You may remember the scene when Julia Roberts goes back to the exclusive shop on Rodeo Drive where the saleswomen had snubbed her because of how she looked. She shows them all of the expensive things that she bought elsewhere and asks them if they work on commission. "Big mistake," she says. "Big. Huge! And, as she turns to walk away, "I have to go shopping now!"

I love this scene. It's such sweet revenge. Yet, I wonder if it was really the small sacrificial death that I enjoyed. It's just a romantic comedy, but the feeling I experience seems to depend on a cross that I didn't see.

The point is that anger is more than just something to be eliminated. It can be an instrument of life, as well as death. Christ, for example, seems to use it to reveal what's important to him and to generate courage to carry out his prophetic acts. But, he doesn't hurt the people or animals that he drives from the Temple, nor does he become a zealot dedicated to the destruction of the Temple or the priests who run it.

The way that Christ uses his anger can be a model for us.

Anger, when we first feel it, is just an emotion. It's a reaction that our bodies have to our not getting something we want, or being threatened by someone or something that we can't control. It's natural, and it's revealing.

By paying attention to what makes us angry, we can learn a lot about ourselves. We may not see the scope of our own secret plans, but they will emerge in unmistakable ways when we are frustrated in some way from carrying them out. We can't help but bump up against each other as we go through life, and we can learn a lot about ourselves by paying attention to our reaction to the conflict.

If you think about it this way, then anger is a reaction to vulnerability, and being honest about what makes us angry is an intimate act. We are angry because we have been hurt, and are worried about being hurt again. To share this anxiety with someone else is to reveal intimate details about us to him or her.

To deny our anger, then, results in emotional withdrawal and even depression that looks a lot like committing spiritual suicide.

The question is what will we do with our anger?

We can turn it on others. This always leaves us looking for their destruction, seeking to do them in. It feels a lot like the mentality that Jesus revealed in the Temple.

It's an attitude that depends on sacrificial death. It may make us feel better about ourselves, as if we have made things right again, or even give us a moment of false transcendence. But, in the end, it leaves us looking like crazed pilgrims running out of the Temple in search of moneychangers and sacrificial animals.

The alternative is to use it for the common good. Anger can be a source of courage, alerting us to exactly where we need to

grow and change, and giving us the strength to do the hard things that we would rather not do. In this way, anger is integral to faith, and necessary for love.

The difference in these two attitudes, I think, is trust.

An attitude of death trusts no one and nothing that it can't control. It may be efficient in the moment, but we will find ourselves needing more and more of it. It's a little like holding your breath to prove a point.

An attitude of life willingly gives up control, and trusts in God, on whom real life ultimately depends. It's dangerous, but it's liberating. It feels like learning to breath deeply for the first time – your body begins to release tension that you didn't know you were holding.

The fruit of this attitude of life is often a growing eagerness to give of ourselves, and to rediscover what it means to be in relationship with others.

This is what happens to Richard Gere in the movie.

He is about the take over a family business, break it up, and sell off the pieces, when he decides at the last moment to work with the founders to keep it together and invest the capital that it needs to grow.

He is about to leave town and return to his solitary life in New York, when he decides that he doesn't want so much control. We see him riding down Hollywood Boulevard standing in the sunroof of a white limousine, with a bouquet of red roses in his hand and the music of the opera La Traviata in the background. He overcomes his fear of heights to climb her fire escape, and the movie ends with a passionate kiss.

Anger is not the problem. We're all angry from time to time. It tells us something about ourselves that we need to know. It's what we do with our anger that matters. Following Christ's example, anger can fuel our efforts to change and grow. Trusting in God, anger can become an instrument of love that leads us more deeply into relationships that, as it turns out, our lives depend.