

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 14—Year B  
I Kings 19:4-8  
Psalm 34:1-8  
Ephesians 4:25-5:2  
John 6:35, 41-51

Our lesson from **Ephesians** this morning is not going to let us off the hook when it comes to **how we are interacting with our neighbor**. And that **neighbor** could be **the person who lives across the street, or someone with whom you work or go to school**; it could be **someone who lives across the country, or across the world**; or it could be **someone closer—a partner, a family member, a friend**. *Unless we are living as a hermit, we are in relationship with our neighbor* (and truth be told, *even hermits can't escape the claims of their neighbor on their heart*). At least since **Genesis**, we have been created for **relationship**, *sometimes for good and sometimes for ill*, but **in relationship nonetheless**.

And, it **doesn't take much life experience** to figure out **how much relationships can go awry**. There are **miscommunications, expectations unmet**—either because they weren't spoken or because they weren't understood or because **the other person just couldn't meet them**. There are **hurts inflicted—unwittingly and intentional**. There are **downright betrayals**. And there's **simply the friction and frustration** that comes with **running up against another being who just defies your understanding**, an **encounter with behavior that boggles your mind**. *In the realm of human relationships, there is always plenty of room for anger*.

So, maybe that's why **Ephesians** takes a whole section to speak to this. And *given that our whole country seems angry these days*, this feels **pretty timely**. When it comes to **community**, **anger is both gift and curse**. It can **spur action and change**, and it can **corrode the fabric of connection**. We often try to **avoid anger** because it **doesn't feel like a "nice" emotion**, or we experience it as a **red-hot emotion, volcanic, sweeping and fiery and out-of-control**. In many ways, **anger gets a bad rap**.

A **story on NPR** back in **June** caught my eye. It was about **anger** and **how to transform it**. Stay with me while I share from this piece. The story notes that, **"Anger can be caustic: harming our bodies, compromising our judgement, inflaming public discourse."** *The story then focused in on a Tibetan Buddhist lama, or spiritual teacher, named Rod Owens and his book Love and Rage: The Path of Liberation through Anger. Owens explains that, "if we learn to harness the feeling, anger can become a powerful and transformative teacher."* He writes, **"I have had to learn to love my anger [and] to treat it as I would treat anyone or anything that I consider precious and beautiful."** He goes on to note, astutely, that many of his **female-identified friends** have told him that they have **never had permission to be angry** while his **white-male friends** have **never been policed around their anger**.

As a **Black person in the United States**, Owens notes that he was **never taught to use anger in a constructive way** and learned that **his anger could get him killed**; he learned that his anger was the **single greatest threat to his life**. Even so, Owens **experienced anger as a constant companion**, and in time, came to see it as a **"secondary" emotion** brought on by something buried inside him. He writes: **"I looked deeper and began to see that anger was the bodyguard for my broken heartedness, for a fundamental hurt that I've been born into [a system] that's not aligned with my intentions to be free, safe and happy."** That realization helped him **re-orient his rage**; he learned how to **create space to forge a "responsive relationship" with anger and other feelings**. Through decades of reflection and practice, Owens came to **appreciate anger's lessons** and suggests the following steps for cultivating this practice of responsiveness.

**1. See it.**

*Observe the emotion.*

**2. Name it.**

*“You have to name the things that you want to transform,” Owens says. Call the anger what it is.*

**3. Own it.**

*This is a critical step, Owens explains. “We have to understand this is happening in our experience, to own it is happening in our mind and our body, not in someone else's. That helps us to take responsibility for it.”*

**4. Experience it.**

*This is different from reacting. Experiencing anger is about getting curious and intimate with the sensation and exploring “how the energy shows up in our bodies and minds.”*

**5. Let it go**

*What this curiosity and awareness allows for, Owens says, is a reference point for our psyches: in the heat of the moment, we can remain somewhat steady and have agency. Anger becomes something we can choose to hold onto or release.*

**6. Let it float**

*“This simply means that I am reminding myself—over and over again—that there's an incredible amount of space that can hold everything. And the space will be present as long as I'm choosing not to react, but to stay within a practice of responsiveness.”*

For those of you familiar with **Cynthia Bourgeault's work**, this is very close to the ***Welcoming Practice but dialed into anger***.

*All of this is what Ephesians is driving at this morning.*

**Ephesians** says: ***Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Put away deception; put away our illusions.*** We're called to be in **honest relationship with our neighbors**. We are **members of one another**; there is no escaping the fact that we are **knit together** whether we want to be or not.

***Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.*** Anger isn't the problem; it's what we **do** with it. **Don't let anger stop the flow of love. Don't let it fester; don't make it lifestyle; don't let it turn into *diabolos*, that energy that lives to throw things apart that takes on a life of its own.**

***Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.*** Your words **hold power—they can destroy, and they can build up**. And everything that **can be said doesn't always need to be said**. Al-Anon has a slogan to ponder before speaking, ***“Is it kind, is it necessary, is it true.”*** **Only speak what needs to be spoken, and your words have a much greater chance of being vessels of grace to those who hear.**

*Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice...* Every way that Ephesians can think of to get at **anger and its tentacles**, it names here:

- The **anger that hardens into bitterness and resentment.**
- The **anger that runs red hot and boils over as wrath.**
- Your **garden variety of anger that is a constant.**
- The **anger that wrangles in the English but in the Greek cries out, shrieks, and screams.**
- The **anger that sets out to take down the other with slander.**
- And the **anger that becomes second nature**, that **becomes our mode of thinking and feeling and acting**, that becomes **patterned deep into our being and behaviors**, permeating every aspect of life, that **desires to injure**, that **seeks to destroy.**

*Ephesians says, “Put away from you all of these.”* Easier said than done, but that’s where Owens’ practice can help us. Hands down, **Buddhists understand practices.** Ephesians tells *what we need to do*; Owens tells us *how.*

But it’s *never* just a matter of *putting away*, but also a matter of *turning toward.*

Ephesians goes on to counsel us: *“And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”*

*Be kind to one another.*

In this **on-edge, hyped-up, angry** world right now, there is **such a need for kindness**—to extend it and to receive it. To be *tenderhearted* is to cultivate a practice of deep compassion, like the **kind you feel in your gut, in your bowels** in the Greek. It’s to **feel the pain of another in your own being** and then **pour back out compassion and empathy toward the other.** Ephesians calls us to the practice of *forgiveness*, reminding us of *the forgiveness that Christ has bestowed upon us.*

And Ephesians calls us to *live in love, as Christ loved us*—a love that is *sacrificial*, a love that *always costs us something*, that will ask us to *surrender something, even if that something is our scorecard of wrongs done unto us* or *the fierce sense that “we” are right and “they” are wrong.* To *love as Christ loves* takes all the past pains, and lets them *die on the cross with him*, so that new life can be born.

*All of this is a tall order*, but just as God sent an angel to Elijah when *he* thought the road ahead too much, *so too*, God will send us the provisions we need for the journey ahead. Provisions like the *counsel of Ephesians*; provisions like the *practice offered by Rod Owens*; provisions like *this bread and wine* that feed our hungry souls and remind us that we are one with Christ *and* members of one another *and* that *oneness* is both given *and* deeper *than all our emotions would have us believe.*

*Anger doesn’t have to be our enemy.* It may, in fact, be the **transformative path** to a deeper love and more powerful connection with our neighbor.

*With God’s help, may this be so.* Amen.

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NPR: How to Control (And Even Use) Your Anger--With Meditation--06-10-21