

Based on *Ephesians 4:25-32, selected verses. On Anger.

**incarnational translation below*

In the year 1999, on the cusp of a new millennium, in the Season of Lent, churches in the United Kingdom embraced an advertising campaign designed to encourage lapsed churchgoers to return to the pews for Easter Sunday. They wanted a campaign that would grab the attention of a fickle public, that would shake them out of their religious complacency and inspire them to a renewed commitment to the faith of their forebears.

Church leaders settled on a poster for their outreach. An outline of Jesus inked in black on a deep orange-red background, adapted from a famous photo of Che Guevara, the Argentine Marxist revolutionary who was a leading figure in Latin American liberation movements. The image became known as Che Jesus.

Beneath the image, the poster says: *Meek. Mild. As If. Discover the real Jesus.*

There was backlash, as you might imagine. But church leaders defended the poster. *Jesus was not crucified for being meek and mild*, they rightly insisted. Jesus was crucified because he transgressed the so-called sacred space of the Jerusalem temple, banishing the money changers with a whip cord (in John's account), turning the tables over in a direct, non-violent action to disrupt the corrupt political, religious, and economic system of his time. This is the real Jesus.

It is far more popular to sanitize who Jesus was and what he said and how he said it. But Jesus clearly saw the truth of suffering and injustice and called it out, with what some - including the person who requested this sermon topic - might call *righteous anger*. Could it be that the same Jesus who asked God to forgive the people who tormented him was, in fact, driven by a simmering rage at the system?

If the story of contemporary Black Tibetan Buddhist activist, Lama Rod Owens, is any indication, the answer may be a sobering *yes*. In his profoundly personal yet wisely philosophic book *Love and Rage: The Path of Liberation Through Anger*, Lama Rod describes his lifelong anger at racism and homophobia as if it were an energizing lover, a reliable partner, committed to him through thick and thin.

As such, Lama Rod honors his anger through his regular meditation practice, holding it without judgment or shame, respecting it as a source of wisdom and clarity, channeling the deep hurt the anger reveals into efforts to confront ongoing injustice. *My anger is always telling the truth about things that I don't want to deal with*, Lama Rod says, as he reflects on his meditation practice. And I am learning to love my anger.

At the end of the day, it seems, anger is a coping strategy for pain, whether it is so-called *righteous anger* in response to injustice or so-called *unrighteous anger* in response to just plain not getting our way. Anger is a coping strategy for the pain of racism and homophobia for Lama Rod. Anger is a coping strategy for the pain of judgment or job loss for others. Anger is a coping strategy for the pain of betrayal or just being blown off for just about everyone.

And let's be honest: whether or not we express it verbally, our *bodies* know when we are angry! Suppressing our anger is not only profoundly dishonest but also physically and emotionally harmful. The heat, the clenching jaw, the rising blood pressure. Anger turned inward exacerbates clinical depression. Anger denied ignites passive aggression. And, as Lama Rod describes of his own journey, the heartbreak for the-world-as-it-is that lies beneath the anger can in fact be *dis-embodiment*, as he was never given tools to metabolize the suffering passed down to him from his ancestors and his family.

This is why I think the author of Ephesians is on to something in telling us to *Speak only the truth with one another, as if you were speaking to your own body, because you are*. Lying about our anger is just as harmful to ourselves and one another as is blowing up in uncontrolled rage.

We can operate from ... love while anger continues to inform what's going on, Lama Rod tells us, as his meditation guides him to let his anger simply *be*. Most importantly, Lama Rod concludes, the broken heart that is uncovered when we honor our anger leads us to compassion for the rest of the broken hearted, which is everyone.

Ephesians is trying, I think, to say the same thing: tell the truth, own the hurt, let it lead you to radical compassion.

So how do we, who may not practice regular meditation, assimilate our anger *before the sun goes down*, instead of causing more harm by suppressing it? One possibility is to explore a powerfully simple spiritual practice from the Ignatian tradition: the nightly Examen.

Each night before going to sleep, we simply ask for God's presence to be clear in our hearts. We give thanks for the day, as we review it in our mind. And then we reflect on our anger.

Did it creep up unexpectedly and knock us off course? Did we stuff it in shame, or lash out uncontrollably? Do we owe an apology? Or, alternatively, do we need to speak up about the hurt we experienced? Is our anger rising from unrealistic expectations? Is there a commitment to working for justice and wholeness we need to make in response to your anger? Is there a difficult conversation we need to initiate? Is there a simple act of forgiveness that will help us let it go?

If there is something that needs to be addressed before we can sleep, we go ahead and do so. If it can wait until the next day, we ask God to guide us through it. We conclude the prayer with gratitude for the wisdom revealed and the grace that never ends.

On a final note: the sermon topic request asked for a distinction between righteous and unrighteous anger. But as I have said, it seems to me that anger is at its core a coping strategy for pain, whether it is anger at injustice or anger at not getting our way. As far as I can tell, there is no real distinction between righteous pain and unrighteous pain. Pain is pain. It is part of the price of being human.

The good news for us is that the grace of God flows through our baptism and into the anger that covers our pain, healing us, holding us, and helping us handle the pain and anger of others, with radical compassion.

**Ephesians 4:25-32, selected verses*

Renounce falsehood.
Speak only the truth with one another,
as if you were speaking to your own body,
because you are.

Don't go off the deep end
when you get irritated.
It is too dangerous
to let the sun go down on your anger:
do you want your anger

to build up and build up day after day,
becoming diabolic?

Refrain from corrupt conversation;
speak only what is good for building up,
as there is need,
so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

Remove all resentment and rage and anger from your spirit,
as well as plotting and defamation,
together with all malice.

Be gentle and compassionate toward one another.
Show kindness toward one another,
as God's Anointed has shown kindness to you.

**"Incarnational translation for preaching seeks to recontextualize biblical texts so that they say and do in new times and places something like what they said and did in ancient times and places" (Cosgrove and Edgerton, In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching, 62).*