

Slow to Anger, Quick to Love
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Text: James 1:17-27

What makes you mad?

I would say lateness makes me mad, (especially when its ME who is late.) When other drivers don't use their turn signals, that makes me mad. Or when you pull up to a stop sign to turn left and then the car that is supposed to be BEHIND you pulls up to your right in order to turn right and then blocks YOUR view of the intersection. ITS. NOT. YOUR. TURN!! UGGGHH I could go on and on about that one. In general, people breaking the rules really gets my goat.

But I think the thing that makes me the maddest is when people in positions of authority do not take young people seriously. As a parent, I have done my best to teach my young adult children to advocate for themselves. They make their own doctors and dentists appointments, have their own bank accounts, and make their own car payments, so when they tell me things like "They are not taking me seriously at the doctor's office" or "I don't like going to that store, the clerks always ignore me" or "Mom, can you go with me to the bank? They won't let me move my money from my savings account to my checking.", I get just a *might* bit livid. I am nice to people 99.999% of the time. But you mess with my kids and I am going show you how I learned to "manage conflicts" when I grew up in Philadelphia. I am all worked up just thinking about this!

"quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger" indeed. Can I get an Amen? Do I have you all worked up too?

Anger is complicated.

I recently came across a survey conducted by Esquire Magazine and NBC news entitled "American Rage". It surveyed over 3000 Americans to determine what makes them collectively angry. Of all the demographics they tested, which group

do you think reported as being the angriest? Interestingly, it is white people and in particular, white men.

Despite the fact that white people have more wealth, higher income, more opportunities, more political power, and more representation in all forms of entertainment media than any other racial or ethnic group in the country, the survey found white Americans are angrier than people of color in this country. The researchers write that this seems to be a matter of "*perceived disenfranchisement* — a sense that the majority has become a persecuted minority, the bitterness of a promise that didn't pan out — rather than actual hardship." (On a very simplistic level, this reminds me of my high levels of irritation with drivers not following the rules) Also of interest, is that white people are less likely to get angry on behalf of other people. In fact, white people are about three times more likely to be angry about the treatment of white men than either blacks or Hispanics, while both blacks and Hispanics are more likely to be angry about the treatment of each other's communities than white people are to be angry about the treatment of either group.

53 percent of women say that they are angrier today than they were a year ago, compared with 44 percent of men. But one difference is that women are much more likely to be angry about the treatment of other groups, rather than for themselves. Men are more likely to be angry about the treatment of Evangelical Christians, atheists, and white men, while women are more likely to be angry about the treatment of women, blacks, Hispanics, Muslims, and LGBT people — all groups that face a good deal more systemic oppression.

It seems to me that this survey reveals three types of collective anger. First there is anger *for others*, especially for those who are marginalized. Then there is anger for *oneself* because of one's own marginalization due to gender, race, or income level, true injustices. And third, anger for oneself because of *perceived disenfranchisement*, anger that is rooted in a threat to privileges one feels is their right. Anger is complicated.

Now let's look at our text from James. How would the writer's original audience fair in the rage survey? The origin of James is a little murky and there has been much controversy over who wrote it, with some believing it was written by James the brother of Jesus, James the Apostle, or possibly even four other James mentioned in the Bible. But what *is* apparent about this letter is that it was written

as a response to people who are suffering. If it was written by James the brother of Jesus, then it would have been written around 60 AD, when Jerusalem was being destroyed by the Romans and the Christian Jews would have scattered due to the ensuing corruption, injustice and poverty. James is renowned for its exhortations in fighting poverty and caring for the poor in practical ways, standing up for the oppressed and not being "like the world" in the way one responds to evil in the world. The listeners are encouraged to embrace heavenly wisdom, which includes peacemaking and pursuing righteousness and justice. To summarize, the writer's purpose is to encourage Christian Jews not to resort to violence in their response to injustice and poverty but to stay focused on doing good, staying holy and to embrace the wisdom of heaven.

It sounds like the Christian Jews of this time had plenty of legitimate reasons for rage and the writer knows it. What is so pastoral and helpful about this letter is that it doesn't deny the legitimacy of anger, rather it channels it for the collective good. Note that verse 19 says "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for *your* anger does not produce God's righteousness." Our anger as an independent force does not produce justice and righteousness. It is when our anger is acknowledged and used as energy to be "doers" of the word that it becomes useful. Unbridled anger, even if it for great reasons, leads to violence and destruction. But do not hear for a minute that James is giving instruction to ignore anger, stuff it, or saying anger is bad. The writer asks us to acknowledge its presence, to move slowly in our anger, to breathe, give it its space, to choose words carefully. Anger that is unleashed on its recipient, may be warranted, but does not lead to God's righteousness. But when anger is used as the motivator to move us into action, to engage conflicts carefully, THEN there can be righteousness and shalom. God's word is implanted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit and in times of pain and injustice, we can focus on that presence to give us the wisdom to know when to speak, when to keep quiet, and how to act.

What about our anger today? What does a letter originally written as a word of encouragement for people who were impoverished and suffering from injustice have in store for us, a congregation that has so much in terms of relative wealth, power, education, and status? Is our anger even justified? Well the reality is, even if anger sometimes comes because of our privilege, it is still a feeling that needs to be worked through. Anger just is.

I also think many Christians, especially modern western Christians feel bad about anger, as if anger as a feeling is sin. At least in my home growing up, anger was not an attribute to be praised. I had a hot temper and I associated feeling anger with being sent to my room multiple times a day without my Little House on the Prairie book, not as a legitimate feeling to process and to be heard. Even the Bible can seem complicated when talking about anger. Colossians says, “But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.” Psalm 37 says “Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil.” If we only read scripture on a surface level, we can take it to mean that anger is bad.

Complicating matters more, statistics state that 1 in 3 women have experienced physical abuse and 1 in 4 men. That means that just over a quarter of you sitting here likely associate anger with emotional or physical violence. No wonder we want nothing to do with anger, when it seems that more *do* people sin in their anger rather than act justly in their anger.

So what are a bunch of people filled with anger and filled with shame about their anger to do?

First, let’s talk about personal anger, not that which is aimed at our greater society, like the anger addressed in the Esquire survey, but the anger we carry from our personal situations. Like being angry with your spouse for not intuiting what your needs are or the co-worker who steals your ideas in meetings and takes full credit.

Look at the way James instructs us to handle anger: to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. Interestingly, this mirrors what a therapist friend of mine says as instruction to her clients. She teaches (and let me be the first to say I am nowhere near having this mastered) to first, accept your anger. Because even when you are angry towards something ridiculous, or even if your anger embarrasses you or ironically if you are mad at yourself for being angry, your anger just *is*. Then breathe. Deeply. Then greet your anger with gratitude. In my case, I say something like “Oh hi there anger, it is good to see you again. I am grateful for you. I am grateful for the ways you have protected me in the past and the ways you empower me to inspire change in difficult situations.” Then ask God’s spirit to give wisdom and discernment as to what to do next.

Now, sometimes the feelings of anger are intense enough, that you need to process that intensity with a friend or therapist before acting upon what you feel led to do next. In fact, practicing what you want to say to the person you're mad at with your friend or therapist, is never a bad idea.

Then...act. Trust that God's good spirit who lives in your spirit, will guide you to do what is right and will convict and mature you, when you act wrongly.

Then listen. Listen to the other person with whom you are in conflict, knowing how important it is for everyone to be heard. As I said before, I do NOT do this perfectly, just ask my husband, my kids, or the good people at my kids' bank. But what I like about this process is that it both legitimizes your anger and gives a path to processing it and using it bring reconciliation. I imagine many of you have some wonderful strategies in handling your anger and I would love to hear them.

So what about that other anger? The righteous anger at injustice, both injustice directed at us and that which is directed at other groups? First, I want to emphasize that this anger isn't just "your" anger, it is "our" anger. It is anger we engage in together. James was written for a body of believers, not just individuals. A little farther in the passage, we are instructed to be doers of the word, not just hearers. We are instructed to not just get rid of our anger, or minimize it, but to use it. Injustice is supposed to make us angry, because anger incites us towards change.

Malcom X once said "Usually when people are sad, they don't do anything. They just cry over their condition. But when they get angry, they bring about change." I think this is something the writer of James is getting at, when he says "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." In their day, some of the most mistreated people were the poor, widows and orphans, and for James, religion that is pure is one where we yearn for their care and restoration.

When confronted with those who are mistreated and marginalized, God's righteousness fills us with Godly rage. We are NOT to sin in our rage, but we are not to keep quiet either, we are to rage in love. We are to rage in caring for the poor, rage in advocating for the orphans and widows, rage in holding our

government responsible for corruption and abuse, and rage when we see others ignored, disregarded, bullied, silenced, wrongly imprisoned, hit, threatened, abused, wrongly detained, cheapened, dehumanized, denied housing, or separated from their families. This, THIS is a religion that is pure and undefiled before God.

Friends, be doers of the word, not just hearers. And when you become mad, which you will, be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, so that you might use it to bring about reconciling shalom to our world.