

July 10, 2016



## “WISE UP...ABOUT ANGER!”

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Scripture: Proverbs 12:16, 14:29, 22:24-25,  
18:21, 29:11

*Fools show their anger at once, but the prudent ignore an insult. (12:16)*

*Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly. (14:29)*

*Make no friends with those given to anger, and do not associate with hotheads, or you may learn their ways and entangle yourself in a snare. (22:24-25)*

*Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits. (18:21)*

*A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back. (29:11)*

Okay. It's time for some truth-telling. How many of you have never been angry? How many of you have never lost it? How many of you never regret anything that you have ever said to someone else? How many of you have never succumbed to road rage when someone has cut you off driving 90 miles an hour on I-696?

One of the things that amazes me when meeting with families after the death of a loved one is occasionally hearing these words, “We never saw our mother get angry. She never said a mean word to anyone. She would never hurt a flea.” I am in awe of people who are even-tempered. I admit that there were moments when our children were growing up that tested every ounce of patience, grace and understanding that God has given me. And I'm sorry to say that I was not always successful in being even-tempered.

People are hurt all the time by others whose anger suddenly boils over, and they lash out with harsh words, or even worse, physical violence and even killing. Carefully cultivating rage in the hearts and minds of others is one of the greatest weapons that terrorists have.

The tragic deaths of Alton Sterling, shot and killed on Tuesday in Baton Rouge, Louisiana by police officers after a 911 call that a man had a gun; and then the death of Philando Castile, shot and killed on Wednesday in Minnesota by a police officer after a routine traffic stop; and then the shooting deaths of five police officers by Micah Xavier Johnson in Dallas last Thursday at a

peaceful Black Lives Matter rally all remind us that the violence needs to stop and that we must address the underlying anger of continuing racial tension in our country. It's not someone else's problem. All of us are called to bear the responsibility.

Anger is a huge problem in our world. How many of you think that you have the right to say whatever you want about someone else, even though you know in your heart that it's cruel or unwise? We have so many issues in our personal lives, so many worries about children, finances and jobs, that at times we just erupt and take it out on others. Sometimes it's not even about them, but they just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Something I hear from people living in other countries is that Americans seem to have fewer social filters than others. They say we are very emotional and feel free to say what we want when we want without any acknowledgement of how we may be hurting another person. It's our freedom of speech in America, right?

One of the great disappointments in this presidential election is that the candidates have not always provided a very good example for the rest of us. Angry rhetoric, name-calling, overt racism, bigotry and smearing the reputation of others now seems to be an accepted form of campaigning. For those of you who followed our United Methodist General Conference in Portland by livestreaming, you may have also heard anger expressed at times at people who don't believe the same way they do.

In truth, even disciples of Jesus Christ lose it. We make assumptions about the morality of others, criticize how they lead or even throw fits when decisions are made that we don't like. As I have met with and mentored young clergy over the years, what I hear at times is discouragement and even shock at the behavior of other Christians and how unnerving it is when church members get right in their face and express deep anger.

What I find really incredible is that when people "say it like it is," without any thought about content or tone of voice, often no one else seems to care. No one speaks up. No one says, "You've crossed a line here!" Whatever happened to leaders who speak graciously and thoughtfully? What ever happened to self-control as an essential quality of those who lead? We can do better not only as a country but as individuals and as a denomination. We can do better.

Our scriptures today are about anger and the power of the tongue. I've put these particular sayings together because it seems to me that most of our anger as Christians is expressed verbally. The focus of these proverbs is on quick anger, out of control anger and anger that is expressed in an inappropriate way.

**There are three problems with out of control anger. We hurt other people. We hurt ourselves. And we disappoint God.** Rosemary Brown is a United Methodist pastor serving in Tennessee. She tells the story about an event that happened when she was eight years old. It changed her life forever.

There was a little boy named Jeter who lived in her neighborhood. Jeter was the only child of well-to-do parents, who made sure that he received everything his little heart desired. Well, one

day his little heart desired the very thing that eight-year-old Rosemary's heart desired. It was a drum that suddenly appeared in the window of J.C. Penney's Department Store. It was white with blue stars and a red, white and blue strap that went around your neck to hold the drum in place. There were two drumsticks for beating out the rhythm, and Rosemary Brown was certain that she would lead the parade if she just owned it. She wanted that drum so much she could taste it!

At dinner that night, Rosemary told her dad about the drum and how much she wanted it. Her dad asked how much it cost. When Rosemary told him twenty dollars, her dad said in kind of a sad voice, "We'll see, honey, we'll see." The very next day, Rosemary heard a sound out in the front yard, a loud noise. She looked out and couldn't believe it. There stood Jeter with her drum around his neck. Jeter was beating out a rat-a-tat-tat and hollering for all the kids in the neighborhood to come and join his parade. Rosemary's heart was absolutely broken, and she made up her mind to put Jeter in his place once and for all.

She gathered up all her playmates on the street and devised a plan. She told the other kids that they would all fall in line behind Jeter, but when they got in front of Mrs. Hilt's house, they would all duck behind the hedge in her yard and leave spoiled Jeter out in the street marching by himself. Well, Jeter started strutting down the street, his head thrown back and his knees flying up as he beat out that rat-a-tat-tat on his new drum.

Rosemary and her friends all followed in line, marching behind Jeter, excited about their plan to desert him. When they got to the hedge, Rosemary gave her pre-arranged signal and one by one, they all left the parade and hid, trying hard not to giggle out loud. They were so proud because their trick was working perfectly.

Jeter just kept on marching all alone. When he reached the end of the street, he turned around and saw that he'd been deserted by all of them. Then he did something on which Rosemary had not counted. Jeter's little arms dropped to his side, and in a voice Rosemary would never forget, he whimpered, "Little Band, where are you?" Then, as if to punish Rosemary for the rest of her life, Jeter started crying.

That was a crossroads for Rosemary Brown. Never before had she intentionally hurt another human being the way she hurt Jeter that day. She had premeditated his downfall as the neighborhood kid who always got what he wanted, but she didn't like the way that felt. It was not fun at all. It was terrible, and she felt horrible.

That day, even though she was only eight, Rosemary made up her mind never again to intentionally hurt another person as long as she lived. She asked God to forgive her so she could be on the side of helping people, not hurting them.<sup>1</sup> Do you see? When we lash out at others in anger, not only do we hurt others, and not only do we disappoint God, but we hurt ourselves in the process.

When John Wesley, the founder of the Wesleyan movement of which we are a part, began to form societies of Methodists in 1739, the first Methodists decided they needed some rules. Not bad rules and not too many rules, but a few good rules. They asked Wesley to develop some

guidelines for Methodist societies, so he came up with what Bishop Reuben Job called the “Three Simple Rules.” **Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.** Three problems: anger hurts others and ourselves and disappoints God. And three simple solutions. Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.

So what should we do when we’re angry? First, I want to emphasize that we’re not talking here about the kind of righteous anger at terrorism, inequality, poverty, racism and discrimination that spurs positive change in our world. It’s in our Methodist DNA to bring in God’s kingdom for all people by seeking justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God.

What these proverbs are referring to is the kind of quick and cutting anger that results in hurtful words. Many of the proverbs wisely say, “If you are angry, cool off. Slow down. Wait. Let things simmer a bit.” Then we can deal with our anger in a rational manner. The ability to show self-control and keep silent often distinguishes the wise from the foolish. Remember, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” (18:21) Did you know that over one hundred verses in Proverbs deal with the power of the tongue? According to Ellsworth Kalas, “It has been estimated that what you and I say on any given day would fill a fifty-page book! That’s a good deal of potential trouble!”<sup>ii</sup>

How many times have you and I left a conversation saying, “I wish I hadn’t said that! Why did I even open my mouth?” Words need to be used wisely and in a restrained way, lest we destroy human relationships in the twinkling of an eye! Yes, we can go back and apologize for what we said, but we can never take the words back. In the words of Ambrose Pierce, “Speak when you are angry, and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.”

That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t talk at all. The tongue is meant to be used. To speak with wisdom is to share knowledge, encourage the distressed, defend the right, bring laughter to the weary, and speak a word for God and God’s goodness. The words of Psalm 19:14 should always be on our lips, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

One thing I do on occasion when I’m angry is write a letter or email to the person or organization with whom I have a bone to pick. Taking the time to get my thoughts down on paper has proven to be a valuable tool. But I have learned never to send the letter or email right away. Rather, I sleep on it for a few days, then go back and re-read the letter. I also often show the letter to someone I trust and ask for advice. Guess what? In virtually every instance, I don’t send the letter as is. Why? Because the letter is usually never redemptive enough. The letter often transfers blame away from me. The letter never shows enough grace.

Whether it’s the temptation to lash out verbally or write a nasty letter, I am continually learning to wait, cool down, seek advice from others and then go directly to the person with whom I am having difficulty and share my concerns in a loving way. Do you remember what Jesus said in Matthew 5:21-26 about anger? “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment... So when you are offering your

gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there and be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

Jesus is clear as can be that our angry thoughts and words are as sinful as our actions. The Greek noun for this type of anger is *ogre*. Ogre is long-lived anger. It’s the anger of one who nurses it to keep it warm. It’s the kind of anger that we cherish and refuse to give up. It’s an anger that we simply will not allow to die.

Why is it so wrong to harbor this kind of long-lived anger? Because when we refuse to give up our anger, we also refuse to forgive the one we believe has wronged us. How many times have I heard people say, “Well, I may forgive him, but I sure won’t forget it,” or “I’ve been hurt so bad, I’ll always remember what she did to me,” or “Things are never going to be the same between the two of us.” All of these statements reflect the kind of sin about which Jesus is talking. The sin is not so much the anger itself. The sin is the refusal to let go of the anger and the bitterness by going to the person, talking it through gently and being reconciled.

My friends, we are living in an angry world. Do you want to be a part of the solution or the problem? Will your words be kind and gracious or cutting and nasty? Will you set an example by how you treat others with self-control or will you feel free to fly off the handle whenever you get the urge? Like Rosemary, will you make up your mind today, now, never to intentionally hurt another person again? Will you be a sign not of hate but of God’s love for our world? Do no harm. Do good. And stay in love with God.

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1. “Jesus and the Woman at the Tomb,” Dr. James Moore, St. Luke’s UMC, April 15, 2001.

2. *Get Wise!*, Ellsworth Kalas, Winsome Ministries, Cleveland, Ohio, 1990, p. 11.