

Better Parents – Better People: Give Yourself A Time Out

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Ephesians 4:26-32, Matthew 3:16-17

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. 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. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Ephesians 4:26-32 (NRSV)

The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God's Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life." Matthew 3:16-17 The Message (MSG)

Join with me in prayer. *Gracious God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear, and open our hearts, God, that we might feel, and then open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

When my oldest daughter was a teenager, we had many wonderful moments with her, but we also had a not so wonderful moment or two. One of which I can remember vividly when she was about 14. It was a Saturday and I was working on my sermon. I'd had a funeral in the morning and was to have a wedding that evening. I was way behind and was stressed. The sermon was not coming together well, and I was frustrated. My wife and my daughter got into a disagreement by where I was working, and they got louder and louder. I was listening to my daughter speak disrespectfully to my wife and it was upsetting me more and more. I was doing my best to stay out of it as was my custom and it reached a crescendo and my daughter said something ugly and stormed upstairs and slammed her door.

Something inside me exploded. I got up, went up the stairs two steps at a time, tore open her door and I grabbed her, and it is only the grace of God that kept me from doing something I really absolutely should never have done. And I scared myself. I don't know if you've ever scared yourself with the anger that takes you over.

I'm so grateful that this was not common in my house where our kids grew up. We had a happy harmonious home. It was like what it says in the wedding ceremony – "a haven of blessing and a place of peace." But our house was like any other house. I walk the streets of our town and our neighborhoods and notice the nice lawns and bushes and I know that behind the doors there all kinds of things going on. And there's tumult in our homes sometimes.

Let's talk directly about that today. I want to talk about our emotions and what a power they are for good or for not so good. I want to talk two directly – anger and delight. And I've been studying about this all week so I'm like an expert now, and I know everything about these topics.

Let's talk first for a moment about emotions in general. Emotions are a gift of God; they are part of who we are and a part of how God made us. We were made in the image of God and God is an emotional God. That's what the Scripture teaches us that God is an emotional God.

Just listen to these Scriptures for just a moment. Genesis 6:6, "And the Lord was sorry he had made humankind on the earth and it grieved him in his heart." Or in Psalm 106:40: "Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people." Or from the prophet Zephaniah: "The Lord your God is in your midst. He will exult over you with joy, he will rejoice over you with shouts of joy." Or Genesis 19:16: "The compassion of the Lord was upon them."

Now there are those scholars who believe that these are not to be interpreted literally that these are actually anthropomorphisms where human beings are projecting their own emotions upon God. They talk about something called the impassability – that's a fancy theological word – the impassability of God. That says that God never changes so God can't have emotions because emotions imply a change in who you are. That you're either sad or happy or whatever, and the character of God always remains the same.

I don't buy it. Because we have a God who is relational, and you can't be in a relationship with someone who has no emotion.

We were made to be emotional creatures. Now we may wish we don't have those emotions sometimes they may scare us. We may try to control them or push them down or get rid of them. We may wish we never were sad or lonely. There's a psychologist named Susan David and she

says, “When people come to me wanting to get rid of their negative emotions, I tell them they have dead people’s goals. Only dead people don’t have broken hearts. Only dead people don’t grieve or aren’t afraid. And you don’t want to be a dead person.” We have these emotions.

I want you to imagine in your brain that there’s a power plant and that power plant has all these things rushing around in it. It has emotions, thoughts, they ride on chemicals and neurons and they’re all spinning around in there. They’re like a nuclear power plant in your head. And they’re full of power. And also in your brain you have a control room for that power plant. And the job of that control room is to channel the power that we have in our brains, to channel that power for God’s glory, to accomplish God’s purposes. We can try and say, “I don’t want to have any emotions. I want to deal with the world in a rational level. It’s all rational.” But you deprive yourself of power that can be life changing for you and the people you touch.

So how can we use these emotions well? Well, let’s first talk about anger. I like the way this Scripture that we read today begins because I think you have to own it. “Be angry.” That’s what it says, “Be angry.” Anger is an important emotion. We can never get rid of it completely. It’s an important emotion. And it is like an alarm. Like fear is an alarm for danger, anger is an alarm that something is wrong. That something is unjust, or unfair or even an inappropriate alarm that says, “The world is not going the way I want it to go. I’m late for a meeting and there’s a traffic jam in front of me, and it’s making me mad. Something has to change!” It’s an alarm that goes off within us.

As parents I believe and there’s disagreement in the literature on this, but I believe that as parents it’s important for us to show anger. Because that’s an alarm for our children. It might make them think, “If I do this then Mom or Dad will be mad. So I’ve got to be careful because when they get mad, I realize that’s a mistake – something’s happened here.” And what’s more is that it gives us as parents the opportunity to model how to deal with anger in a constructive and appropriate way. If we decide we’re never going to get mad, then how will our children ever learn how to deal with it? So anger is an important emotion.

Now let me say that one of the problems we see so often is chronic anger. Houses, lives – I’ll be honest people listen to what I refer to as “The Merchants of Outrage.” You know, the whole world around us that is trying to make us do stuff by making us mad. It just bubbles around us. And we’ve got a life to live and it’s hard. So when I talk as a pastor to people who are struggling with understanding God as a loving and forgiving God, oftentimes they can’t

understand it because they grew up in a house full of chronic anger. And they grew up tiptoeing around, walking on eggshells, afraid that the explosion was coming. So what do we do when that alarm goes off – when that anger pops up in our heads? What do we do?

Well I want to give you four things and if you're a "writer-downer" then I'll give them fast. Here's the first – press "pause... take a stop... give yourself a time out."

You heard the Scripture – "Be angry, but do not sin." You know it's in Ephesians, but it actually comes first from Psalm 4:4. "Be angry and do not sin, ponder in your own hearts on your beds and be silent." Take a break.

Now the problem is that we have these impulses so if I'm preaching along and one of you sends me a text message while I'm preaching, and I feel it on my phone in my pocket and on my Apple watch. It takes everything I have not to take a look – in the middle of my sermon. It's an impulse. Do you remember the old days when we didn't have telephones with caller ID on them? Or a machine and you'd be in your house and the phone would ring - it just wasn't possible for you not to answer the phone. You couldn't do it. You wouldn't say, "No, let's just keep talking and not answer the phone." No, you wouldn't do that because the impulse is to say, "I've got to get up and go answer the phone!"

But here's what changed. It's marvelous and now you look on your cell phone where there's caller ID and it says who's calling. Or at our house when the phone rings a little voice comes on the landline and says, "You have a call from...." And you don't answer the phone. I know this is true because when I call you none of you ever answer the phone. None of you do. I get calls back, that's a good thing, but you say, "That's Pace calling... No, I'm not going to get it."

Here's what I'm trying to tell you. It's possible for you to stop and think before you respond. It's possible when that anger alarm goes off in you it's possible for you not to jump into it.

Now here's the second thing. Look for the hook.

I went to a leadership training event many years ago and something that happened has stuck with me for a long time. There were all preachers there. The speaker began by saying, "I'm going to hang my hat on the wall." Then he took his hat and threw it at the wall and of course it just fell down. Then he did it again and again, the hat fell down. Then after he did this a third time he asked, "I'm trying to hang my hat on the wall – why won't it work?" And we said, "There's no hook." And he said, "That's good. You're going into the ministry and people are

going to throw stuff at you. Maybe criticism, or ideas or problems or all sorts of things. And if it sticks to you then you look for the hook. What is it inside you? Don't look so much at what they're saying, look at what you're feeling and what's going on inside you that's making that stick. That's setting off an alarm. With your children are you worried that they'll grow up to be jerks, that you're feeling disrespected or that you're feeling scared for them? What is it? Is it that you're in just a bad mood and things at work aren't going well and they're the closest ones around to take it out on? What is it inside you that makes that alarm go off? So don't spend your energy initially thinking outside of you, thinking inside of you. The Psalmist says, "Lay on your bed and be silent."

Here's the third thing – figure out your strategy. So in that space of time what are you going to do? The Scripture says, "Do not let the sun go down on your anger." What does that mean? It means that you have to resolve it, you can't ignore it. It's an alarm. You either need to change something in you or you need to address the issue, but you have to resolve it.

The Scripture in Matthew 5:22 should be familiar. It says, "You've heard it said do not kill. But I tell you anyone who is angry with his brother or sister is liable for the judgement." So we think, "Then I'm not even supposed to be angry." The Greek word there for being angry is actually a verb, not an adjective. It is written like "angering." Do not anger. But it's in the continuous action grammatical form so you could translate it "Do not stay angry with your brother." Or "Do not keep getting angry with your brother." What he's saying is that you need to resolve it. Of course we're going to get angry since we're human. But don't stay angry - resolve it.

So how do you resolve it? Let's see what the Scripture says. Verse 29 says, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is useful for building up as there is need so your words may give grace to those who hear."

Decide what strategy you're going to employ to resolve the issue. And that's generally not hurtful words.

Russell Kolts is one of the psychologists I was reading this week said, "Anger is a wonderful indicator but a terrible strategy." It says something's wrong but lashing out in anger is generally a terrible strategy.

Okay, here's the fourth thing. It's pretty simple. It's in verse 32: "Forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you." Look, we're going to make mistakes and lash out and we have

to breed a culture of forgiveness where we ask for it when we've made a mistake. I'll tell you that an hour after I went up and had a meltdown with my daughter I went back up and said, "I'm sorry." I didn't say, "I'm sorry but you disrespected me. You disrespected our mother." I said, "I'm sorry, I should never have come at you that way."

Anger a powerful force to be used very carefully. Now the flip side of that is a different emotion. The Scripture says, "And a voice said, 'This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life.'" You know our first and second responsibilities as parents is to love our children and second is to take delight in them. To experience the delight we have.

One of my favorite times is when we have our children's choir sing. I can't see the kids because I'm back here and the kids are all out in front, but the parents have fought for these seats here in front. They come in early and push the people away who usually sit here – If you're one of those then you're out of luck that week! They're here. I love to watch their faces as they react and sometimes, they mouth the words since they know the same words that the kids are singing. Or when our Pure Sound kids are singing at 8:30 and their parents are out here smiling as they watch them sing. Or you know on television when the college football game is going on and they show the parents of the quarterback or one of the other players. They've got all their gear on with the different colors, and every time something amazing happens they're so happy – they're high-fiving everyone around them. They're taking delight in their children.

I'm a grandparent now and let me just say that's our only responsibility. That's all we have to do is to take delight in them. My favorite moment is lying on the rug on the floor of our family room with all the grandkids jumping on top of me and we're wrestling. We're just laughing – it's just such a moment and it's as good as it gets for us to take delight in them.

You know that babies have mirror neurons so when you smile at a baby, what happens? The baby smiles back because you activate these mirror neurons and that forms that child's self-image. We can form the self-image of a child by taking delight in that child. Why is it that sometimes we feel that delight for our children or others around us, co-workers, friends, but we don't express it? Are we afraid that somehow if don't open up all that other stuff's going to come pouring out, so we just keep a lid on all those emotions?

Here's what I would tell you. You can redirect all of that energy that's inside that power plant toward delight. And let it happen.

Now let me just say that it's not just for parents but for all of us. We are all parents for the children among us. Children are concrete thinkers and they see no distinction between God and the church. And they see no distinction between the church and us. So how we respond to a child in their little minds is how God responds to them.

I was at an event here at the church and we were going around the table asking the question, "What is your first memory of St. Luke's?" There was a man maybe 40 years old – I don't know exactly – who said, "Well, I didn't grow up at this church, but I played on a little league team here – a UCAL little league team – over on the field." I was so proud because I thought it was so cool that a church would have a field. But then he said, "I had a really mean coach." I stopped when he said that. Then he went on, "I was a little overweight and one day I finally hit a home run and when I came around third base the coach didn't say, 'Way to go!' No, the coach said, 'I don't know whether to time you on a stopwatch or a sun dial!'" That was when he was eight years old and he still remembers it.

Contrast that with going to the Rotunda Theater when Pure Sound performs one of their shows and the whole community of people – not just their parents – but a whole community of people are there cheering for them whooping and hollering – delighting in them. Or go to our Youth Ministry event and see the counselors who are there with the kids, playing Frisbee and laughing with them and shooting baskets. Talking to them and enjoying them, taking delight in them. Or a Sunday school teacher who greets the children saying, "I'm so glad you're here!" Or any one you who sees a child in the hallway and doesn't look over their heads but looks them in the eye and takes delight in them.

My goal would be that every single child who walks through the doors of St. Luke's would experience God's delight in them through you and me. Two very powerful emotions. Anger and delight. Let's use them right. Be angry but do not sin and anoint these children with delight.

Gracious God, it's not easy. Sometimes we struggle to deal with all the emotions inside of us. It's hard. But you have given us the ability to use them for your glory; they're your gift so may we channel them with love. Amen.