

United Church in the Valley: March 17, 2019
Student Minister: Matthew Heesing
*Making Space for the Struggle
...of Anger*

Scripture Reading:

Mark 3:1-5:

One day, Jesus went to the synagogue to worship,
and a person afflicted with shriveled, withered hand was there.
Some of the religious authorities were among the crowd,
waiting and watching for a reason to accuse Jesus
and bring charges against him.

They wanted to see if Jesus would heal this man,
even though it was the Sabbath—the day of rest—
and thus against the Jewish law to do any kind of work at all.

Jesus said to the person afflicted,
“Stand up in front of everyone.”
Then Jesus turned to the crowd and said,
“Which is lawful on the Sabbath:
to do good or to do evil,
to save life or to kill?”

But they remained silent.

Jesus looked around them in anger, furious.
He was deeply grieved by their bitter, closed hearts.

Turning back to the person afflicted,
Jesus said, “Stretch out your hand.”

The person stretched their hand out,
and the hand was perfectly healed.

Sermon begins on following page.

Sermon:

This morning is the second installment
in our Lenten sermon series of
Making Space—for the Struggle:
making space for those realities
we would rather not wrestle with,
rumbling with those difficult issues in our lives
that we don't often look at closely.

And we started by making space
for the struggle of interruptions.
And today we're going to dig
a little deeper under the surface—
maybe even get under your skin,
and talk about making space in
our lives for the struggle of—anger.

How many of us have ever gotten angry?
How many of us have gotten so angry
it surprised us—
and we said something
completely out of character,
or we did something that we would never dream of ever doing,
or we broke something
on purpose or by accident
all because the blood that was boiling within us
was simply too much for us to bear.

I've been there. We've *all* been angry.
We've all felt that emotion rise within us—
and sometimes, even acted on it too.

Yet even though
we all know
that we get angry,
we don't often make space
for the struggle of anger—
it's much more likely that we ignore it,
we conceal it,
we don't want to deal with it,
we feel like if we were to reveal it,
it would be like The Incredible Hulk:
“You wouldn't like me when I'm angry!”

But it's worth wrestling with our anger.

Because our anger is important.
 Our anger can point to what we value and desire.
 And that can ignite a fire within us
 that we can then use
 to either harm or to heal—
 the problem isn't our anger.
 The problem is our apathy towards it. ——

Even Jesus got angry.

And if we think of Jesus being angry,
 we probably picture the time that he
 turned over the tables in the temple—
 but in that particular instance,
 even though that's how we often portray it,
 the story doesn't say that he was angry when he did so.
 That specific incident doesn't mention Jesus angry.

But there is a passage in Scripture that does.

“One day, Jesus went to the synagogue to worship,
 and there, among the crowd,
 was a person afflicted with an injured hand—
 a withered, shriveled, hurting hand,” it says.
 “And also there that day were a group of Jewish religious leaders,
 waiting on edge and watching closely
 for a reason to accuse Jesus and bring charges against him”—
 you see, Jesus has been challenging their authority,
 reinterpreting their traditional interpretations,
 so these religious leaders are trying to trip Jesus up,
 to give them even the most minor of excuses
 to have him arrested
 and reinforce their own reputation in the process.

These religious leaders don't think that Jesus
 should heal this person's hand because it would break
 one of their most important rules—it would constitute an act of work
 on the Sabbath day of rest.

However, Jesus knows that they are in the crowd that day,
 he knows the way that they are hoping he'll respond,
 so Jesus says to the person afflicted,

“Stand up in front of everyone.”

And Jesus turns to the crowd and says,

“Which is lawful on the Sabbath day:
 to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?”

But the leaders remained silent.

The Scripture reading says that they had nothing to say.
 Jesus' pointed question—public and confident—
 calls them out, even exposes their agenda
 and they have no answer in response.
 They don't care about the man afflicted—only themselves.

And the story says that Jesus looked around them in anger, furious.
 Jesus gets angry.

Just last month, the CBC Radio show *Tapestry*
 did an interview with renowned philosopher Martha Nussbaum.
 The segment was titled "A Better Way to Be Angry,"
 and in it, Nussbaum talks about how
 anger often has two distinct parts:
 the first, is that initial feeling
 that something wrong is afoot,
 that something I care about greatly is threatened,
 whether myself, or something else I love.
 Our anger always points to what we value and desire.
 Perhaps a sense of fairness, or control,
 or following the rules, or being respected,
 or making sure everyone around us has enough.
 That's the first part of anger—
 that powerful fire that rises from within
 when something that we deeply want or wish for
 is not happening
 in one way or another.

But then there's the second part of anger—
 how we use it, the way we respond,
 and often, that has to do with the pursuit of payback.
 We imagine—and sometimes even try—
 to get even, to inflict some sort of proportional pain,
 maybe by our own hand,
 or more likely, through the law,
 or life in general—
 we hope that this other person's life goes poorly in the future.

According to Martha Nussbaum,
 these are the two distinct parts of anger,
 the fiery feeling and then what we do with it,
 yet when the second part involves a search for payback,
 we don't actually right the wrong.
 Our anger only ends up harming those around us,
 and harming us,
 instead of being harnessed
 in a more productive, life-giving way.

Later on, Nussbaum goes on to say that the first part of anger is absolutely necessary to drive campaigns for social justice—a clear sense of wrong-doing is absolutely crucial for protests and empowering change. But if you are focused on inflicting pain, she explains, you can't build a constructive movement. All of the major social movers, explains Nussbaum, from Martin Luther King Jr., to Mahatma Gandhi, to Nelson Mandela, to the Gay Rights activists, feminists and more, they all began with anger, but used it in ways that did not harm, but healed.

These different individuals did not ignore their anger, nor conceal it, nor make a decision not to deal with it, but consciously made space for the struggle of anger in order to bring about positive change.

And we see the same with Jesus.

Jesus looked around them in anger, furious. He was deeply grieved by their bitter, closed hearts. Jesus is angry about the state of affairs, the way that these leaders are doing and saying nothing, the games they are playing at someone else's expense, he is angry that someone in their midst is hurting, yet no one will step up and help.

Jesus gets angry.
But here's what Jesus does, in response:
Turning back to the person afflicted, Jesus says, "Stretch out your hand." The person stretched their hand out, and the hand was perfectly healed.

In the words of Rob Bell, "Jesus' anger leads to an act of healing and restoration, his anger, it increases the peace of the world, it results in this good deed that makes things better."¹

¹ This sermon was inspired by Rob Bell, *Nooma*, "Store."

Which, of course, begs the question,
What is making us angry?
And what should we do with that anger?

Just a few days ago,
there was a shooting
at a Muslim mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand.
Over 49 people are dead and another 50 wounded,
all as a result of one individual,
citing anti-immigration reasons and motive.
Because of this, and other recent incidents
many Muslims all around the world
no longer feel safe in their own places of worship,
their sanctuaries.
That should make us angry.
How will we respond?

Here in Canada,
more than 80 First Nations communities
are currently under “boiled water advisories,”
and beyond that,
21 communities are deemed to be at high risk for contamination—
around 73% of First Nations water systems
are considered inadequate and dangerous
to human health and the environment.
73%—in Canada.
That should make us angry.
How will we respond?

And furthermore,
according to the organization Canada Without Poverty,
1.3 million children in our country live in poverty—1 in 5—
and in the year 2016,
more than one-third of food bank users across Canada
were children,
and about 1 in 7 of those using shelters in Canada
are children.
That should make us angry.
How will we respond?
It’s worth wrestling with our anger,
because our anger is important.
It points to what we value and desire.
And that can ignite a fire within us
that we can then use
to either harm or to heal—
the problem isn’t our anger.
The problem is our apathy towards it.

We need to make space for the struggle of anger.

For when Jesus was face to face
with a situation of injustice,
when Jesus was in a place
where someone's suffering was ignored,
when Jesus encountered a case of oppression,
Jesus made space for the struggle of anger—
an anger that resulted in healing, not harm,
positive change, not the pursuit of payback,
his anger welled up and he released it in this way,
to the person afflicted, Jesus would say,
“Stretch out your hand.”
The person stretched their hand out,
and the hand was perfectly healed.

St. Augustine,
a Christian in the 4th-century once said,
“Hope has two beautiful daughters.
Their names are Anger and Courage.
Anger at the way things are,
and Courage to see that
they do not *remain* as they are.”

may we also
become aware of our anger.
May we make space in our lives
for the struggle of anger.
May we express our anger in acts of courage,
channel our anger into work of hope,
and harness our anger,
just like Jesus,
for peace and healing
all throughout the world.

Thanks be to God.