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Anger versus Compassion versus Indifference

One of the things that I always get wrong in my life is anger. Whether I keep my anger within or lash out at the object of my rage, I am almost always wrong. Now admittedly, there is, as we see in Jesus, righteous anger. He got angry at the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, the dishonesty of the Temple merchants, the lack of pity of the lawyers. I guess I follow along when I get angry at the abuse of the vulnerable – children, women, prisoners, employees, schoolmates, differences – the venality of some politicians, the obtuseness of some commentators. But where I get it wrong is in those areas of less sterling merit: someone has the audacity to think differently than I do, or his selfishness is both breathtaking and seemingly unconscious, or I am taken advantage of against my will. Then my anger flairs up, either within or without. And I am always in the wrong.

For one thing, anger makes me feel bad. The rush of adrenalin and other hormones is hard to endure in themselves – the tightening of muscles, the shaking of extremities, the disconnectedness of speech and thought – all are hard to endure. The aftermath is almost as bad – physical aches, emotional exhaustion, a sense of shame that I have thought and acted against cherished values. Then there is the knowledge that psychological research has shown that anger, especially chronic anger, is destructive to the mind and body, shortens life.

Anger is simply not good for the human being, which is why forgiveness plays such a large part in the message of Jesus and of His followers. In His most serious moments, Jesus teaches us that forgiveness heals the person hurt. When He taught His disciples to pray, He said: forgive as you are forgiven. When He was dying an unjust death on the cross, He cried out, “Father, forgive them.” The great saints echoed that cry, sometimes in the midst of their own deaths. The great spiritual directors teach an important truth: Forgiveness is for the benefit of the offended, not of the offender.

This little screed against anger is prompted by the readings today from the evangelist John, not these particular readings, but the anger against the outside world and especially the Jewish world that we see at some points in John’s writings, his gospel and his letters. The anger is expressed against those who do not believe the Christian message of salvation from human selfishness come from God through the work and words of Jesus. The anger was prompted by the mutual rejection in John’s time of the synagogue and the early church. If you believed in Jesus, you were thrown out of the synagogue; if you didn’t believe in Jesus, you were shunned by the Christian community. This rejection shows up when John takes up pen to write about Jesus and His message and meaning. It is no betrayal of our Christian commitment to acknowledge this unfortunate theme in John’s writings. It is incumbent upon us to set it aside when we read John’s account of Jesus. Like the bad Greek grammar of Mark’s gospel, it is unworthy of the Lord Christ.

What are alternatives to anger? One that I do not recommend is indifference. Indifference is that apathy that says one or both of two things: the issue in question is not important, or the person addressed is not important. Some people are tempted by indifference, for it seems a way of calm and peace. One's emotions are not disturbed; one's life possesses an even tenor. The problem with indifference is that it denigrates the glory of the person addressed and of the issue at hand. Some issues are worth dying for, as Jesus showed us, and as His saints have evidenced as well. Every person is worth dying for, as the death of Jesus shows. Christian theology says that whatever the meaning and power of God's death and resurrection in Jesus, it is meant for every human being, not for just a select few. So I think indifference is unchristian; it's just not worthy of a follower of Jesus Christ.

So what else is there? I think the answer is compassion. Compassion has none of the disadvantages of indifference and all the advantages of love. Compassion keeps us engaged, both with the issue at hand and with the person we are addressing. This continuing engagement gives proper weight to the issue and acknowledges the glory of the other person as a child of God, just as we are. In addition, compassion has the humility not to judge, not to place oneself in a superior position. Compassionate humility knows that each of us can be wrong, is not in a position to claim superiority to another child of God, and leaves whatever judgment may be necessary to the proper authority, which, of course, is God.

Compassion looks at the other person, recognizes that he may be wrong, and refuses to walk away. The other person is too important for that. Compassion looks at the issue and makes a discernment, that is, this issue may not be worth the discord that we are stirring up with it and therefore should be discarded. Or, this issue is worthwhile and not to be dismissed, but treated with honor and respect, as we treat the other person with honor and respect.

The way of the world, the way that Jesus rejected at various points in His life, is the way of judgment, anger and dismissal. The way that He chose is courage, humility, trust, and respect. This is part of His glory. It is certainly part of His teaching. It certainly should be part of our discipleship.

Now if I can just remember this the next time I get angry.