

Sermon for Sunday, March 27, 2022
Fourth Sunday in Lent
“Is the Anger Helping?”
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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Is the anger helping? That’s what I want to ask the older brother in this story. I’m asking that of myself as I rage about the news of the world. I’m wondering that as we see our country exploding with righteous indignation. Is the anger helping?

I understand the anger of the elder brother. It’s about so much more than the goat. I think he sees the injustice of it all so clearly. I can hear him saying, *This is wrong. Are you just going to let him treat you that way, dad? Your son took half of what our family had to live on, half of what will keep you safe in your old age, and he squandered it. Now he’s back and you’re going to waste more resources on celebrating him? And, by the way, you’re now spending my share of the inheritance on him, without my consent. You’re turning a blind eye to all the problems, sweeping it all under the rug. I’m not going to dignify this charade with my presence.*

I can hear the elder brother’s protests resound still today. *They have wasted precious resources. There has been irreparable harm. They are squandering the legacy of this country. This action will leave us morally bankrupt. We must have justice and accountability. There needs to be a reckoning.*

We put our feet down, dig in our heels, and refuse to engage with things that are wrong. I get it. I do it. But I wonder, is the anger helping?

I wonder, too, what pain lies beneath the anger. Is the elder brother haunted by a vacant chair at the table, by an absent look on his father’s face? Does he ache for his father to stop peering out the window long enough to turn and really see him? The loneliness must be so heavy, and the worry. Does he lie awake at night agonizing about what will become of my family? I wonder how long he’s been seething, how long the bitterness has been festering. I wonder if he’s ever shared any of this with his father, if he’s ever said, “I’m hurt, I’m tired. I’ve stayed home and still I feel so lost. I want to be seen and celebrated.” What would have helped the elder brother with all his pain?

What pain lies beneath our anger? Maybe rather than asking, “Is the anger helping,” maybe I should ask, “What will help? What will I do with this anger? Will I allow it to fester, or bring it to God in prayer? When I see rage in myself and others, can I explore the pain below the anger? How can I tend the pain?”

Would some joy help? Joy seems essential to this father. It seems to be how he wants to heal both the sons - by inviting them each into the feast. When the elder brother stands outside the party, totally committed to justice and totally alone, the father sees him. The father goes out to welcome him into the celebration. The father receives all his pent up rage and responds with love, saying, “All that I have is yours” and “We have to celebrate and rejoice. Come and eat.”

I'm so struck by that line, "We have to celebrate and rejoice." Is this father, is God saying we need joy as a balm for pain, joy as an antidote to anger? Can laughter be a teacher? Can celebration heal deep wounds? Is this father, is God saying mercy and kindness are as important as justice? Are there some hurts that can only be tended with love, some pain that is healed only at a feast?

What will we do with anger within and around us, dear church? How will we care for those haunted by empty chairs, those who feel unseen, unwelcome, unappreciated? How will we live in such an unjust world? When we stand outside, appalled at it all, God sees us. God comes to us. God receives all our rage, all our pain. God welcomes us into the feast.

We are tended. We taste joy. We experience mercy.
Such loving care helps us to remain curious about the pain beneath the anger.
Such welcome allows us to respond to others with mercy and kindness.

Is the anger helping?
What will we do with the anger?

God comes to draw us into a healing joy.