

# **Anger: Friend or Foe**

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## **Centering Thoughts:**

“Red is such an interesting color to correlate with emotion, because it's on both ends of the spectrum. On one end you have happiness, falling in love, infatuation with someone, passion, all that. On the other end, you've got obsession, jealousy, danger, fear, anger and frustration.” - Taylor Swift

## **Prayer/Reflection/Meditation:**

Anybody can become angry - that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way - that is not within everybody's power and is not easy. —Aristotle

Think of a time recently when you were angry. Think about how you felt before, during, and after. Do you feel positive or negative about the experience and the outcome? If you felt negative about it, can you think of a time when you were angry and you felt it was a positive experience or resulted in a positive outcome? Try and hold these positive and negative examples of anger in your mind as you listen to the sermon.

## **Sermon:**

Many years ago a friend said to me: “Jen, on your tombstone it’s going to say: ‘It Pissed Me Off’.” (She wasn’t wrong 😊) Throughout my life I’ve had a complex relationship with anger. It is, for better or worse, my ‘go to’ emotion. When I told Ilze I’d give a sermon this summer I didn’t really have a topic in mind, but as I searched for one that I felt passionate enough to get up here and talk to you all about I kept coming back to ‘anger’. Several times recently I’ve found myself, unsuccessfully, trying to explain to someone my feelings about anger. Perhaps, I thought, by forcing myself to prepare a sermon on the topic I would be able to clarify it for myself. I’m still not sure if I’ve been successful.

I’m not much of a ‘process’ person. I’m more of a “Get ‘er done!” type, but putting together this sermon was definitely a “process” for me. “Anger” is a really BROAD topic and what did I really know about it? So I started where everyone starts these days...I googled it. I read article after article - The Positive Side of Anger; How to be Passionate Without Being Angry; Toxic Anger; Turning Your Anger into Positive Energy; Is There a Religious Way to be Angry?, Anger and Aggression, and on and on and on. It was all very interesting and thought provoking, but what did “I” want to say about anger? Why did I feel that it was an important enough topic for a sermon, and what did I have to share with all of you about it that would make it worthwhile for you to spend time listening to what I had to say?

Anger is most often perceived as a negative force in our world. If you go to google images and type in 'anger' your results will be filled with pretty scary images. We are afraid of anger in our society and many go to great pains to minimize it or avoid it completely. Anger tends to be equated with things like rage, violence, crime, and loss of control. Think back to the examples of anger that I asked you to think about during the Reflection earlier. Were your positive or negative feelings about the experience due to how you felt about being angry or how you felt about how you acted as a result of being angry. For some just feeling anger is enough for them to judge themselves harshly.

The reason I chose the quote for our centering thoughts today [from the great modern day philosopher - Taylor Swift ☺] is that I wanted you to think about all the different forms that the energy we often label as "anger" can take – passion, jealousy, rage, wrath, fervor, indignation,...to name just a few. And how closely those forms are actually related to love, conviction, concern, and righteousness. Think about it...what is the opposite of anger? It's not happiness or joy or kindness....the real opposite of anger is indifference. I completely relate to Gary Oldman's statement "My passion and energy get mistaken for anger." In fact I'm sure more than one of you has heard me jokingly say "I yell because I care!" ☺ But as with all humor there is a kernel of truth there. You usually don't get angry about something that you don't care about.

Anger is a perfectly normal emotion – one that all of us experience, but some people feel bad about even 'allowing' themselves to experience it. Our society frowns on many expressions of anger and women especially are not supposed to get angry. [That's a whole different sermon.] If we express our anger we're labeled harpies or hormonal or bitchy. However, psychologists generally agree that suppressing anger is just as detrimental to your physical and mental health as too much anger. Too much anger in your life can lead to high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke, and anxiety while suppressing anger can lead to depression, anxiety, stress, and ulcers. So, which is it? Do we express our anger or hold it in? Sometimes I get angry about the fact that I'm not supposed to get angry!!

Today instead of thinking of anger as positive or negative I'm going to ask you to think about it as 'energy'. Energy can be either positive or negative. When channeled properly it runs our cars, lights the darkness, and heats our homes. But that same energy left unchecked can blow things up, electrocute people, or burn down your house. If we look at anger, or really any emotion, as inherently neutral – as 'emotional energy' - then we can stop feeling good or bad about experiencing those emotions and concentrate on channeling that emotional energy into positive forms.

Emotional intelligence is knowing how to manage emotional energy such as anger. Knowing how to use it as a signal to yourself when things are unsafe or unjust, but also knowing how to step back and measure your response. I don't think that there is anything wrong with getting angry. I think that our society asks us to suppress our anger too much. Anger is a real emotion and we can't just "quit feeling it" and we shouldn't feel guilty for feeling angry. However, lashing out in anger is not productive. While I don't think that feeling anger is a negative thing it doesn't mean that I like conflict any more than the next person. I hate having people upset with me and I feel badly after I've lost my temper. Believe it or not I try to avoid conflict as much as possible.

So how do we learn to channel the energy of anger positively? How do we learn to use it as a tool? Even if I had the answers I wouldn't be able to teach you how in one sermon (or two or three), and I'm still working on all this myself. But I hope I can convince you to start down the road to thinking about anger differently and being more 'conscious' of how to use its 'energy' for positives in your life. People say that you can choose whether or not to be angry. I don't agree with that. I think that 'angry energy' will come to each of us at times whether we choose it or not. However, I do think that we can choose how we channel that energy.

Anger can be a tool to defend, protect, or motivate you. It can help you identify healthy boundaries, stand up for yourself, and protect against toxic people and environments. Each of us needs to recognize the energy of anger and how it manifests itself in our life. How to be aware of that energy in yourself and know how best to control it and channel it into positives. This of course, is easier said than done, but a lot of it is just paying attention. I was tired of not having people listen to what I was saying because of how I was saying it, and hearing that people were 'afraid' of me. So I started paying attention and learning to be more conscious of when I was getting angry. At first this was a lot of 'looking back with 20/20 vision'. I would get angry and then have to take the time to look back and evaluate what had lead up to the 'eruption', how I was feeling before, during, and after my outburst; and what I could have done differently.

If this is something you would really like to work on I'd suggest keeping an 'anger journal'. Find time each evening to review your day and identify times throughout the day that you felt angry. Track what was happening before and during. Record how you expressed the emotional energy. How do you feel about what happened? What might have been other options for expressing the energy? Try to learn more about yourself and anger. Pay attention – what makes you angry? How do you respond when you get angry? Do you yell, cry, withdraw, become sarcastic? Does your anger make you feel guilty or anxious? How does your body feel when you get angry? Does your heart rate increase? Does your face flush? Do you pace or feel the need to move or be active? Does your stomach hurt? Do you expect yourself to always be calm and collected? Does that create angst or guilt when you do feel angry?

By just becoming more aware of how and why you get angry you can start to control the outcomes. For example, I've learned that I'm MUCH more likely to lose my temper when I'm feeling 'pushed' for time. This isn't a huge surprise, but identifying it and being conscious of giving myself more time when possible or being aware of the building frustration enables me to be more patient with myself and the situations I'm encountering. It has also enabled me to let people know when I'm more likely to lose my temper or to remove myself from a situation until I can get the energy back under control. Sometimes "Mommy needs a time-out". I've also learned what doesn't work. I tried meditation...it's great for some people, but it doesn't work for me.

I have also worked on identifying what tools help me to control and channel the energy into more positive outcomes. Some recent examples of things that work for me are: I went for a vigorous walk and had a vigorous conversation with a friend and felt healthier and better afterwards. I was angry about an institutional response to something sol wrote out a very long and angry response and then deleted it. I was angry about things that our bleepety bleep POTUS had done so I went with a friend to participate in activism with like-minded citizens. Recently, a friend said something off hand in a meeting that really hurt my feelings. I was angry and hurt, but I knew that it wouldn't be productive to confront her with it when I was

feeling that way. Later I was able to talk to her and tell her how I felt in a way that she could hear and acknowledge. And I felt the issue was addressed without any harm to the friendship. If I'd yelled at her in the middle of the meeting we were in she would have been embarrassed and defensive and angry at me and the whole group would have felt uncomfortable and that wouldn't have been productive. If I had just let it drop then she wouldn't have known that her comments had hurt me and I would have carried forward resentment towards her that, over time, could have proved cancerous to our friendship. All of these examples have not only improved my relationships with those around me, but they have made me feel better about myself.

Now in this format it all seems very straight forward...just be more aware and then find a positive outlet. In reality it's messy and imperfect and has a high failure rate. Let yourself feel angry – don't feel guilty about it. Know that it's a normal, healthy emotion that all of us feel. But be aware of your anger. Know what sort of things tend to make you angry. Think of ways to dispel the angry energy without hurting/jeopardizing those around you. Go to the gym, run, take a long walk outside and yell at the rocks and trees and bushes and birds, have a friend who will listen to you rant and know it's not directed at them, write out all the things you want to say, draw, hammer, knead bread, whatever works for you. Once you've dispelled the energy, and perhaps put some time and space between you and whatever the issue is, then revisit it and see if you still feel that it's an issue and what sort of response is appropriate. Keep an anger journal if it helps. You will probably still lose your cool every once in a while. When that happens apologize. Apologize for lashing out, for not controlling the energy. Don't apologize for getting angry.

Don't forget that sometimes Anger IS the appropriate response. Sometimes we need anger to show us that things are wrong, unsafe, or unjust. Anger about many of the things going on in our country these days IS appropriate. Use the energy of that anger to spur you to work for justice in a way that's meaningful for you – participate in marches or rallies, help get out the vote, write postcards, sign petitions, run for office, donate your time and money. Find ways to turn that angry energy into positive change in the world. Get creative - I have a friend who instead of arguing with her racist relatives, makes a donation to the ACLU every time they post something racist on Facebook. Martin Sheen said "Anger can be good if it's an energy that motivates you towards action to right the thing that is angering you." And Desmond Tutu said "There are things that must evoke our anger to show we care. It is what we do with that anger. If we direct that energy we can use it positively. We CAN be gentle, angry people working energetically towards justice in our world.

### **Benediction:**

If the political happenings of this past week have left you with an excess of angry energy, we are providing an opportunity to practice channeling that energy into positive action during coffee hour. Please join us at the tables outside to write postcards to voters in key districts and strategic races.

I leave you with this from Crystal Andrus: "There is a place for anger. Use it to spur you into action – making a change for the better! Don't hold it in your body...it will only poison you. Transmute it into courage and willingness. Burn it up as jet-fuel for greatness!"