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The Angry Sermon
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Some of you may have heard this story before. That is okay. Some stories can be told more than once; like Christmas and Easter, like the stories of our births, and moments in our lives that changed us forever. Those stories can reveal God with us and sometimes we can get distracted right out of a story and miss that important detail the first or second time around. Other times we might hear something different than we heard before. There are good reasons for telling some stories again.

My reason today is because this is a story that taught me how fruitless anger is. Many of you know a requirement to becoming a priest in the Episcopal Church is attending an Episcopal seminary where one earns a Master of Divinity degree. There are 11 Episcopal seminaries scattered around the United States and they are as diverse as the many parishes in the Episcopal Church. Some are liberal, some conservative, some progressive, some historical, some ecumenical. I attended and graduated from Nashotah House Theological Seminary in Wisconsin, which, despite its excellent academic and Benedictine structure, has a reputation for being ultra conservative. The main reason for its reputation is the administration and most of (though not all) faculty are theologically opposed to the ordination of women. I need to state here just because I attended this seminary, I do not agree with their stance on ordination.

Before attending this seminary, I inquired about this reputation and expressed concern. I was told by the administration the seminary would not tolerate behavior that dehumanized or threatened any of its students. However, I had only been attending Nashotah House about a month and a half before I stumbled on a blog when using the computers at the seminary library. This blog had been saved on the computer dashboard and I accidentally clicked on it when trying to get online to check my email. The blog was written by a few students who were opposed to women in the priesthood, were threatened by women students on campus, and they expressed this fear through anger by writing all kinds of vulgar, derogatory, and discriminatory things about the women students and their supporters on campus. At first, I was in shock. Then I was angry that such material was so easily accessible on a public computer. Then I was even angrier to witness such dehumanizing beliefs coming from future priests. When I encountered their anger, my response was feeling even more anger.

All this anger created a big disruptive mess on campus. Nashotah House is not a huge academic institution. Class size is usually only a dozen students or less. At 37, my class was one of the largest in many years, which created a big change on campus. In addition to our size, we boasted the most women students in one class ever. There were five of us. So, the campus community was more vulnerable and sensitive than it had been in many years and the administration was not prepared for a disruption caused by the diversity and inclusion they had been proud of.

Because they weren't prepared, the administration did not know how to handle the disruption. They attempted to force a reconciliation between the women students and the men students who had created the blog. However, the men did not express any repentance – they did not apologize for the blog or for how they had shared their anger. Instead, they expressed relief their anger was public, that they weren't forced to pretend the women students belonged.

I had hoped the administration would honor their promise about not tolerating behavior that threatened other students. But instead, the administration at the time said we women were too sensitive and it was our fault for causing the disruption simply by being on campus and answering our call to God. Since we did not repent for our presence, and the authors of the blog didn't repent, there was no reconciliation.

At this point, all my anger drained out of me. I was disappointed. And hurt. And I learned a valuable lesson about anger. Anger – at least in this situation- doesn't make the world a better place. Even if it is righteous anger, the kind of anger that is connected to our values, what we feel whenever we see or experience something we believe is wrong or unjust.

However, this isn't the end of the story. I watched as individuals on campus responded to the situation in their own ways. Some were supportive of the women; others weren't necessarily supportive of women's ordination but felt that the blog and the damage it caused weren't justified.

And out of this situation, there was a miracle. After three years of worshiping together, working together, praying together, eating together, studying together, suffering through Biblical Greek and Hebrew together, something beautiful and born of the Holy Spirit happened. We learned to respect each other. Many of the people on campus who were initially opposed to the ordination of women changed their hearts and minds, and realized God calls women and men to the priesthood; and the inclusion of one does not mean the exclusion of the other. And I changed. I listened to the reasons why those colleagues of mine were opposed to women's ordination. Sometimes it was

because their diocese wouldn't ordain them unless they held that view. Other times it was because they had never met a priest who was a woman. By the end of my three years in seminary, we were living the Beloved Community, and Nashotah House at that time and place was reflecting the Kingdom of God. Not because we were all the same, but because we made room for each other, respected each other, and let the Holy Spirit transform us. One of the reasons I tell this story is because I believe it is evidence Beloved Community is possible and because it is also evidence that love goes much farther than anger when it comes to reflecting God's transformative love on earth, a love that really can conquer fear and anger.

This is the same moral Paul was trying to convey to the followers of Jesus in Ephesus that we heard in today's Epistle or second reading this morning when he wrote: "Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...." This is just a small portion of a long letter Paul wrote to the early Christians about how once a person is baptized, they are intended to live in a manner that reflects the love of God in the same way Jesus did through his life, death, and resurrection. Although Paul wrote this letter thousands of years ago, it is still relevant today.

If I had to pick one emotion to describe the last few years, it would be anger. It seems everyone is angry about something. Some of this anger is selfish; people are angry they can't get their own way, or they are angry there are things beyond their control. Others are feeling what is called righteous anger and are angry at the injustices in the world like racism, ageism, all the problems created by greed. Like I observed in seminary, all this anger hasn't made the world better, no matter how loudly or meanly people scream at or bully each other; it hasn't made a change that transformed the hearts and minds of everyone in the world. Most of what this anger is doing is creating more anger.

Too many have let the sun go down on their anger and this has poisoned many communities, institutions, families. Theologians and psychologists believe this is because unless we work through and deal with our anger, there is no room for anything else. Working through anger starts with naming or identifying the emotion behind or beneath the anger. Psychologists tell us anger is often a surface emotion for something deeper like fear or grief. In a world that seems to have little tolerance for fear or grief, such as dismissing those emotions as evidence for being weak or unstable, when we do feel fear – such as fear of the unknown, - or grief – such as grief over any loss of normalcy or relationship – these emotions are often expressed as anger. However, once we recognize why we are angry, we can begin to work through the situation, like my classmates and I did in seminary.

We can see a glimpse of this in the Gospel for today when the religious leaders complained against Jesus because they were angry he called himself the bread of life, the bread that came down from heaven. An indication of their anger is when they attempted to put him down by saying he came from a poor family and was a person of lesser importance because of who his parents were. Anger can do that for us; it can give us a temporary anesthetic or numbing to emotional pain or fear by tricking us into feeling superior to others. It might feel good to lash out at someone but expressing anger this way, but it can do a lot of damage by hurting relationships because it can hurt people. Which might be why instead of defending where he came from, Jesus responded by talking about the kind of life he brings, the kind of life that connects people to God and creates God's Kingdom here on earth, one that is based on God's love for all people.

Yet, we could ask, doesn't God get angry? One of the reasons given by people I talk to around campus for why they don't believe in God or go to church is because they dislike the image of the angry, punitive God of the Bible. It's a statement I am not afraid to respond to because once you actually read the whole Bible, you will see God is not always angry – there is a lot more to God and the Bible. Yes, God does get angry in the Bible. It's therefore important to pay attention to what makes God angry. One of things that makes God angry in the Bible is when people hurt each other. When Cain killed Able. Another is when people chose to follow ways other than God's ways and caused harm to each other and to the earth. That's what happened in the story of Noah. Or when people blatantly decided to follow a false god, like the Israelites and the golden calf that they created to lead them back to slavery in Egypt. These are things that made God angry. The injustices of humanity. We can learn a lot about God by how God dealt with God's anger. Usually there was a dialogue between God and the people, or through someone like Noah or Moses where God both talked and listened. Then there was a change, usually in the form of a new covenant like the rainbow after the flood as God's promise not to destroy the world through natural disaster or restoring the ten commandments after Moses smashed them. In the Old Testament, God's anger was never where the story ended. Instead, God dealt with God's anger, forgave, and created a new covenant, established a change in the relationship between God and people in hopes that new covenant would lead to a better way of living where everyone could experience forgiveness and life.

This is what Jesus showed us when he suffered death on the cross, bearing the anger not of God, but humankind. In so doing Jesus opened the way for God to respond to anger with love, this time undoing the death anger creates and

transforming that death into new life, one that can't be destroyed. One that invites us all into the Kingdom of God, a kingdom that is not just about life after death, but life we can help create with God here and now.

I know there is a lot of anger in the world right now. For lots of reasons. Perhaps it is past time for us to stop nursing our anger and listen to the words of Paul and Jesus and think of our anger not as a means to an end, or a state of being, but the beginning of a process that could lead to changes in our hearts and minds and maybe even in the hearts and minds of others. Maybe it's time to recognize emotions like sorrow or grief or fear aren't bad, they are gifts from God that are intended to help us live with empathy and compassion for each other; to help us find common ground so that we stop demonizing those who are different from us, stop blaming them for things we can't control, and start recognizing our shared belovedness. Maybe it's time to stop thinking only about ourselves and instead think about how we can live God's Kingdom right here and now, by sharing the life-giving bread of Jesus to a world angry because unresolved fear and grief has left it starving for hope, love, and joy. This may be what God is calling us as a church community to do together.