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Living with Our Own Anger

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Several years ago, William Young wrote a novel which was both much-read and much-debated. Entitled "The Shack", it told the story of a man whose young daughter had been kidnapped and brutally murdered. The man, struggling with a bitter anger, is invited by mysterious note to come alone to the shack within which his daughter had been murdered. Expecting to find the murderer there, he prepares himself for brutal struggle. But he meets God in the shack instead.

What follows is wonderfully warm and theologically fertile portrayal of the trinity. But the wonderfully open, warm, embracing, nurturing, all-forgiving God that William Young's character meets does have one, hard, non-negotiable condition for getting to heaven: He has to forgive, not just his daughter's murderer, but everyone, absolutely everyone, if he is to ultimately join the community of the blessed. He can go to heaven, but not if he continues to carry his anger.

Whatever ecclesial deficiencies Young's critics have accused him of, he is dead right and powerfully challenging on this central point, letting go of anger and bitterness is a non-negotiable condition for going to heaven. Indeed, I'm convinced that there comes a point in our lives where we need only three words in our spiritual vocabulary: Forgive, forgive, forgive. Morris West, in a short autobiographical essay that he wrote to celebrate his 75th birthday, phrases this more positively. He states that, upon arriving on your 75th birthday, you should only have one phrase left in your vocabulary: Thank you!

Gratitude is the opposite of anger and we have too little gratitude in our lives. We are generally more angry than grateful. Moreover, to the extent that we even admit that we are angry, we tend to rationalize this by either dogma or cause: "I'm angry, but with cause! Mine is a righteous anger, like Jesus' when he upset the tables of the money-changers in the temple!" "Sure I'm angry, but why shouldn't I be, given how the conservatives have killed the openness of the past generation, re-entrenched a new intolerance into both the church and this country, and have no conscience for the poor!" "Sure I'm angry, but why shouldn't I be, given what the liberals are doing to this church and this country! Just look at abortion and gay marriage!"

We should be cautious in flattering ourselves in this way: Unlike Jesus crying over Jerusalem, our tears are generally not warm tears of love and sadness over division and misunderstanding. Our tears, when there are tears are all, are generally cold tears of bitterness and anger at the sense of having been wronged or of having to live in our churches and our society with people whom we consider ill-willed, lazy, small-minded, or just plain ignorant. We are more like the older brother of the prodigal son, doing mostly the right things, outwardly faithful in our religious and moral duties, but shackled with bitterness and a deep-down anger that makes it hard, or even impossible, for us to enter the dance, to let go, to forgive.

Too few of us admit that we carry a lot of anger inside of us, that there are places in us that are bitter and resentful, and that there are still certain persons, incidents, and events in our lives that we haven't forgiven.

As well, to camouflage our anger we like to make a public display of our generosity and goodness. We tend to make a show to family and friends of how nice we are by praising someone lavishly and then, almost in the same sentence, call someone else a name, slander someone, or speak viciously or sarcastically about someone. This proclivity to divide others into either "angels" or "demons" is a sure indication of anger inside of us. We make a display of praising certain people (a display meant more to publicly exhibit how nice we are than to highlight someone else's virtues) and then bitterly complain about how awful some other people are and how we are forever surrounded with idiots. Both the praise and the complaint testify to the same thing, we are living with anger.

Honesty and humility should eventually bring us to admit this. We all carry some angers and we should not deceive ourselves on this. We need courage and honesty to face up to this.

Perhaps we could take a lesson from groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and introduce ourselves to each other, or at least to our confessors, in this way:

"My name is Ron, and I'm an angry person. I rationalize this by telling myself and others that my anger is justified, that I'm like Jesus, kicking over the tables of the money-changers to cleanse God's house. But I have come to realize that this is self-deception, simply a way rationalizing my own hurt. As I get older, I realize that I'm like the older brother of the prodigal son; I am standing outside the circle of warmth and community. But, the good news is that I'm in recovery."

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