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The Function In Ministry of Psalms Dealing With Anger The Angry Psalmist

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Abstract

Thomas L. Mowbray has outlined a four-step process for dealing with anger, which is based upon the work of Dr. Leo Madow and in-depth studies of the imprecatory psalms. The purpose of this study is to help people actualize their anger, identify the sources of their anger, understand why they are angry when they are angry, and deal with anger in realistic and appropriate ways. The intent of this study is to increase people's sensitivity to anger energy, that they may become more aware of the possibilities for using that energy in positive ways.

Preface

In this paper I intend to explore the topic of anger and to offer theological reflection and a strategy for the function in ministry of psalms dealing with anger.

Anger is a Fact of Life

Anger is a fact of life. It is real, and there is a constant need in the human being to recognize it and deal with it where it exists.

Anger is usually understood as something which exists in persons who are angry. It belongs to them and they are responsible for it. Therefore, dealing with anger is primarily the responsibility of individuals.

Anger that is repressed, hidden or ignored can easily become displaced, causing much harm to angry individuals and those around them. If anger can be expressed in a controlled way, then constructive ways of dealing with anger can be explored.

Dr. Leo Madow has proposed a four-step approach for dealing with anger. First, individuals must recognize that they are angry. Dr. Madow's point is that many people do not "feel" their anger and, therefore, cannot accept the fact that they are angry.

Next, persons should try to identify the source of anger. Is it someone, something, God? The more honest people are at this level, the more likely they are to realize that the main source of anger is themselves. They have no reason for blaming others for their own anger, nor for blaming themselves for the anger of others (Rohrer).

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My anger is mine. It is not someone else's. But habit and tradition usually rule out such honest approaches to life's existential problems. Dr. Madow's point is more simple; it cautions one against displaced anger. If I am angry at my boss, I should not take it out on my wife, etc. Displaced anger is a problem that knows no age limits. It is displayed by the child who kicks the cat because he or she cannot get what he or she wants, as well as by the sweet, old woman who becomes violent when moved into a nursing home. Some would point out that such outbursts are not so much due to an overabundance of anger as they are the results of expressed anger which is due to a lack or a deficiency of something: lack of control of one's life, lack of power, prestige, etc. Life has its vacuum-producing experiences which cause feelings of inferiority and impotence, all of which may elicit, induce or cause anger.

A third step in dealing with anger is to understand why people are angry. Is their anger realistic? Does one expect special treatment from others or from God, or just simple justice? Does one seek pure fairness (an unreal wish in the real world) or is one simply interested in practicality?

The fourth stage involves dealing with anger in realistic ways where direct expression may not be healthy or wise.

These four steps offer a paradigm for those who want to do something with their anger. I say 'with' rather than 'about', for the management of anger demands the actualization of that which is to be managed. Anger, as the expression of pain, is power. In order to manage anger, one must accept and acknowledge the value as well as the risk of anger energy.

These are the basic choices available for the management of anger (Augsburger). One may internalize it which easily leads to depression, externalize it which usually leads to physical violence, or one may actualize it which means channeling it for positive uses. These basic understandings about anger can facilitate a healthy attitude when one becomes angry. With a healthy attitude, angry persons can actualize their anger and become motivators, like the psalmist.

The Psalmist Deals With Anger

The psalms display controlled and constructive ways of actualizing anger. Even the imprecatory psalms (88, 109, 137) offer pictures of controlled anger which is focussed, channeled and actualized. The lid is kept on the angry person's personhood even as the anger is blown off. The psalmist does not jump or burst into cursing (137) as he bursts into praise (19). Even the psalmist's complaining questions in his laments, such as "how long" and "why" (Ps. 13), display an actualization of his strong, negative emotions.

Although Old Testament scholars see the imprecatory psalms as having more personal than liturgical and congregational functions, one must keep in mind that the psalms were addressed to the deity by one who was part of a congregation of believers. Therefore, one should be impressed by the fact that the primitive psalmist, in his devotions to an all-powerful deity, nevertheless, through the actualization of his anger, managed to overcome the fear of uttering his complaints to his God.

Alone and overwhelmed (137, 27:9, 13:1-4), the psalmist vents a justifiable and very real anger against oppression, against all that prevents him from controlling his life, against all that makes life meaningless.

In this light, perhaps one can see Ps. 88 as the lament of one who is standing up for his rights (88.7) in a world which cares little for the individual. What is the cause of his outburst? Is it an accumulation of anger, or is it more realistically due to a loss of control over his life (v. 4)? The psalmist breaks through his fear and cries out, "My God!"

In Ps. 88 the psalmist has painted a picture of grave illness and unrelieved gloom, but also of actualized anger. He strikes out against the meaninglessness of his fate by channeling the power of his anger into a desperate prayer.

Likewise, Ps. 109 offers fresh insights into the psalmist's actualization of anger. The psalmist's implied trust in God is underlined by awareness of the fact that people's actions are retroactive (v. 17). What appears to be vindictiveness (v. 6-20) may also be appreciated as a controlled venting of anger in the form of a list of curses based upon the psalmist's real, personal, negative experiences. His general cry could represent a variety of realities from the anger of the truly oppressed to the incantations of a bunch of rascal boys up in a tree house uttering maledictions against the members of a rival neighborhood gang. Nevertheless, this is not the psalmist's natural way (v. 4); it is his angry way. His anger is real and it is actualized in a prayer for deliverance from that which has caused his anger.

Even Ps. 137 offers constructive insights into the value of actualizing anger. The boiling cauldron of the concluding verses (7-9) certainly expresses hatred and, in almost unrestrained rage, freely vents vengeance and despair. It also expresses directly the barbarity of ancient warfare (Anderson on Kraus), which raises the ultimate question: Should one not be angry about war? Is not anger against the insanity and inhumanity and sin of war, natural? What anger could be more real than the actualized anger against war!

One who can so vent his or her despair has come very near to realizing the need of the human being for confession. This is a way of saying that although the actualization of anger may not be the answer to one's problem, it is, nevertheless, part of a precious process which can bring about health and wholeness.

In summary, the psalmist actualized his anger which was real, not simply perceived. He realized that he was angry, identified the sources of his anger, understood why he was angry and dealt with his anger in realistic and appropriate ways through prayer and supplication. This process creates a type of positive Socratic dialogue, as Victor Frankl has called it, within the psalmist, illustrated by the shift in addresses, and through an aesthetically pleasant medium offers the possibility for the communication of deep human understanding which we twentieth century people should see as evidence of the understanding of the human conscience - that signal gift of God which says to each of us that we are children of God, that we have worth and rights with others, that we are able to care and confront, that we are responsible (Augsburger).

Theological Reflection

If the God of Creation created all, then God created human anger. Our anger may be ours in a real sense, but if it is understood as a gift, then our responsibility as people of faith is to actualize that gift in positive ways. People of faith should assume that each gift of God offers the opportunity to increase one's interaction with God, not decrease it. Is it then no wonder that the writers of the psalms included even the gift of anger in their liturgical offerings!

The actualization of anger is no easy matter, for the potential for negative results is real and it is great. But, the underlying message of the psalmist is to refrain from anger (37:8). Anger is not the best state to be in, nor is it the preferred way (109:4), but anger is real. Vengeance is God's (Deut. 32:35, Jer. 51:36) and he is ready for it (Ps. 7:12-13), but anger is mine and God's. Anger is part of the judgment process (Ps. 78:49-50) of a God who is merciful (v. 38-39), whose nature it is to look into the hearts of those who suffer, to draw the miserable out of their darkness (Ps. 113:7-9), to reach down in compassion even to our anger in order to lift us up to God.

It is this balance of power and love that creates and maintains justice (Augsburger on Tillich).

Jesus understood this. He demonstrated a uniquely positive use of anger. It was out of concern that he rebuked the Pharisees who misinterpreted the truth. He realistically acknowledged his anger, using it to express his care (his rebuke to Peter).

Application

As a pastor I have met people suffering from unrelieved gloom. As an individual and as a pastor I have felt deep, personal anger due to circumstances beyond my control and beyond the control of others. There is such a thing as genuine anger due to feelings of inadequacy and loss of control. Furthermore, as life presents to each of us circumstances beyond our control, it also presents circumstances involving persons who, though redeemed, seem to lie beyond the realm of salvation in any endorsable sense.

It is a fact of life and history that the world has never been without vindictiveness, brutality and bitterness of every kind. These things the psalmist knew and felt. More than that, he understood their significance and he struck out on a path of actualization. Without the benefit of the development of logical thought or the modern sciences of the mind, the people of ancient Israel rested assured that there is a difference between right and wrong, between good and evil. They took both the right (psalms of praise and thanks) and the wrong (lamentations and imprecatory psalms) more seriously than we do today (Anderson on C.S. Lewis).

Although A. A. Anderson and others have said that it is unlikely that the imprecatory psalms were used during public worship, he admits that there was probably some ritual connection (Anderson, vol. 2., p. 759). Psalm 88 has

appeared in modern liturgies for a Good Friday reading. Although modern psalters have omitted the last three verses of Ps. 137 and the curses of Ps. 109, these psalms have appeared in the relatively modern psalters of oppressed people. A brief survey of my own tradition's use of the psalms revealed that the Bay Psalter, used by the Pilgrims, included the imprecatory psalms in their entirety in "English metre" so that they could be sung "in the Churches of God."

Oppression and injustice notwithstanding, we who live in the nuclear age would benefit from a clear understanding of the meaning of war for the defeated in our time, as clearly as the psalmist understood it in his time. The reality of such shocking horror leads us to the ultimate question which must be asked in every age by each new generation: How does one serve God in a sinful world?

The psalmist offers to us the experience of those who have faced hell and meaninglessness, who have, along with their praises and thanksgivings, expressed their anger against injustice and meaningless oppression, as well as the anger against self, others and God for their indifference and passivity.

Although the modern consensus against the use of the imprecatory psalms in Christian worship is sensible, the possibility for the positive use of such psalms in pastoral care should not be overlooked. People do get angry and their anger is real. Sharing the anger of the psalmist, who could be angry while trusting in God, could be a very positive experience for people.

The psalms of lament and of imprecation would also be useful during times of national or congregational lament.

With sensitivity to the pain of the angry, the preacher may find the imprecatory psalms useful in identifying the real enemies of our time to whom curses would indeed be appropriate. People should know that it is O.K. to be angry about injustice, oppression and indifference, about the arms race, about all that empties life of its meaning; it is O.K. to feel angry about one's illness or one's confinement in a nursing home. To suppress such anger is to lose control over one's life.

Also, the laments and imprecatory psalms may provide the examples we need for breaking down the wall of fear we have against anger. Anger misdirected or suppressed can accelerate our descent to Sheol, but anger acknowledged and actualized through prayer and supplication can lead us and those around us to salvation.

We, all of us, need to do everything possible to increase our interaction with God, rather than reduce it. We too need to get the facts to God so that God can and will judge.

As someone has said, I may not be my brother's keeper, but I am my brother's brother and my sister's brother. One of the facts of the relationship is that my anger is mine, not theirs. I own it. I am responsible because I am worth something to God: I am able to care and confront. And I am thankful that the psalmist of old has helped me celebrate this.

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