Sunday, August 21, 1983
HOW TO DEAL WITH ANGER
Ephesians 4:1-7,25-27,31-32

What is it that makes you angry? Here I'm talking about more than just the normal, everyday irritations of life — things like having chosen the shortest but slowest line at the checkout counter; the motorist ahead of us who does not use his turn signals; the person ahead of us in line who always seems to write a check for only $1.20 worth of merchandise; the driver ahead of us who seems to wait forever to move after the light changes to green. Each one of us has a list of things which irritate us. Some of you may get very irritated with a waiter or waitress who takes too long in serving you or get very upset if a teenage son or daughter is a little late in returning home at night.

The other morning KFOR radio had listeners call in to say on the radio what irritated them the most. There were dozens of phone calls with people waiting to air their pet irritations. One person called in to say that individuals who chew on ice especially irritated her. Another complained about people who chew gum vigorously, often with their mouths open. Some were trivial irritations, and some were not.

Behind these fleeting irritants lie far deeper frustrations, buried in our hidden memories. And behind these is the deepest need of all — the frustration of not being the fulfilled, happy, complete person we were meant to be.

All of us get irritated at times, but what is it that makes you truly angry? Irritability can be the emotional launching pad for anger. But anger comes in many forms and a thousand disguises.

Some years ago, I did a sermon on one kind of anger called "the anger of morality." People who consider themselves very religious, and therefore highly moral, often get very angry when someone else does not follow the rules as closely as they do, even though that someone may break a religious rule in order to serve a higher purpose.

This is what happened a number of times with the Pharisees and scribes in relation to Jesus and his disciples. In one incident, according to Luke's Gospel, they were so angry they wanted to kill Jesus on the spot.

We are all subject to the temptation of the "anger of morality." And it is anger in its most dangerous form, because we justify it by being convinced of our own righteousness.

But this morning, I want us to consider another kind of anger — the anger that is a part of each one of us because it is a normal human emotion. It is the anger that often exhibits itself as rage when it is expressed outwardly, and, if expressed violently and physically, can be very destructive. Extreme examples are child abuse, spouse abuse, abuse of women — including rape — and most of the other crimes of violence which are so prevalent in our society. On the other hand, anger turned inward and repressed becomes self-pity. Then we can become depressed and feel sorry for ourselves.

The anger we are talking about this morning can be expressed in numerous other ways. Information is withheld, cooperation denied, and needed communication is prevented because someone is angry with another. Reputations are ruined, careers broken, marriages wrecked, and friendships destroyed by anger which is not handled in nondestructive ways.

What are we to do? Anger does flare up in all of us. If we are convinced that anger is wrong, that may lead us to repress and hide our feelings, and when we do that, we can become depressed, despondent, and tense, unaware of the reasons. On the other hand, to express rage without restraint can be destructive.

First, let's try to understand some of the causes — that is, the sources — of our anger.

Many of us get angry when we don't get our way. Or we get upset when someone challenges our power or positions. If someone makes a mistake which has bad consequences for us, we can get very angry. We've all seen baseball managers, coaches, and players blow their tops on some of the calls which the umpires make, but not, of course, if the umpire's mistake benefits their team.

We also get angry when someone takes advantage of us or manipulates us or uses us. Then, too, we can get very angry because of our failure to feel good about ourselves. This can surface either as rage or self-pity. Someone described the problem this way: "If the world hates you, that is cruel; if it persecutes you, that is terrible; but if you can't stand yourself, that is unbearable." Sometimes we feel so ashamed about our anger that we repress it to the point that we won't know it is there.

Our limitations can cause anger within us. We do not like to fail or make mistakes. We do not like the thought of dying. We get upset with ourselves when we get sick, have an accident, or can't do what we used to do because we are getting older. Sometimes we get upset or angry with life itself. And we even get angry with God. We get angry because the wrong people get sick. The wrong people are treated badly. The wrong people suffer and die young. Bad things happen to good people, and that makes us angry. Senseless murders, fatal practical jokes, innocent people killed in auto accidents by drunken drivers, crime in the streets — all of this and more can make us very angry.

The limitations of others with whom we come in contact can also be a source of anger for us. Thus, the death of someone we love or were very close to can cause us to be angry. Anger is one of the normal stages of grief. In a book entitled, Living with an Empty Chair, the author tells us that one of the most powerful emotions during a period of grief is anger. She says, "Feelings of anger that were brief during the initial stage are likely now to reoccur with greater frequency and strength. Your anger should not be stifled by those attempting to help you. You are indeed angry. You have been abandoned by someone you love. You have a right to ask, 'Why me?' Your feelings of anger are proof that you are human."

What are some ways, then, that as Christians we can deal with our anger, whatever the cause or source?

First of all, it does help to try and determine the source of our anger. Then we can know if it is just something that is a minor irritant, or something more serious. We just might discover that we are being angry for the wrong reason or that we have blamed the wrong person or that the cause of our anger is not worth worrying about. And that in itself will help us deal with our anger. We will no longer get angry at minor annoyances and irritations, but save our energy for those things that are major.

Secondly, it will help us to deal with our anger to realize that being angry is not in itself a sin. It's not even a sin to be angry with God. God understands and can handle our anger. St. Paul

said to the Ephesians, “Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.” In other words, admit your anger, but do not let it control you, and then find a constructive way to get rid of it.

Some deny that they have anger, and that is not helpful. Then they do not ask for what they want and need. They do not assert themselves. When others seem to be insensitive and disregard them, their emotions become so strong internally that they may feel that they have no other choice but to check out of life. Berating them does no good; they already hate themselves. This anger turned inward as self-blame and self-pity can be so vengeful, it will not even let the person admit angry feelings towards others but will be seen as self-pity.

There is even some evidence now that when we continue to deny and repress our anger, it increases stress in our lives and can lead to physical illness. In his book, Getting Well Again, which is about cancer, Dr. Simonton notes that many people who are good candidates for cancer are those who have “poorly developed outlets for emotional discharge.” Or, to put it another way, “their emotional outlets are blocked by an extreme desire to make a good impression.”

Thirdly, in dealing with our anger, it is better to let it come out straight, rather than disguising it. By making believe we are not angry, we may be able to maintain the pretense that we are not inwardly anger-prone. If we suspect that it is wicked to be angry, we can twist our feelings into other moods which seem more acceptable. Thus, we try for the best of both worlds. We give signals to other people that they have done something that deserves anger, but that we are too good to get angry. This gives us the luxury of expressing anger without the risk of having it thrown back at us. Besides, we can thereby arouse guilt feelings in others and get them to feel they owe us something.
If our children leave their rooms in a mess after being told several times to clean them up, we can clean them ourselves, always with a sigh and a groan, always so that they can see us. We thus let our anger parade as hurt goodness. Our reward is the illusion that the children will then recognize how much they owe us for being such sacrificing, longsuffering parents.

Or a woman might be angry at her family for forcing her into a domestic role that does not satisfy her. So she throws herself into housework with a self-righteous vengeance. After all, she feels, what right has she to be angry at having to do what every other woman was created to do? So she disguises her anger with a mask of grim and joyless dedication to the housekeeper’s role, and she expects to be praised and loved for her sacrifice.

Disguising anger relieves other people of the responsibility to do something about our anger. All it does is to force them to deal with an irritable person who will not let his or her anger be recognized for what it is. And the disguises behind which life is lived in pain and anger only prevent us from changing the situation which has caused the real anger. The result is that we become even more irritable.

It’s OK to be angry as long as we deal with our anger openly and do not mentally or physically abuse someone with our anger. To forbid all anger in the name of love is as mistaken as forbidding someone to be irritable. Love does not make anger wrong. There are things in life that demand our getting angry at them. Not to feel angry at them would mean we are either insensitive to evil or afraid to feel anger. We would be in a moral stupor if we failed to get angry at racial injustice and the hunger of children. But then we have to follow up our anger with positive action that will help change what should be changed.

In other words, the emotional experiences that arise from anger are not meant to be dissipated in rage or self-pity. They are meant to be used for constructive purposes. Anger can be a powerful fuel for action that is helpful and positive.

Dealing with our anger in personal relationships in constructive ways can bring new joy into our lives. Here's how one husband dealt with it in relation to his wife. The husband wrote: "Martha and I have been married almost thirty years. A few years ago, we decided to use David and Vera Mace's book, How to Have a Happy Marriage, in order to add more joy to our own marriage.

"The book outlines a six-week contract, with carefully detailed procedures for communicating, growing, and handling conflict. One exercise required ten minutes of thinking about some particular emotion and then telling our thoughts to each other. We chose to think about anger. We were to think about when we got angry, how we felt, and how we acted when we were angry."

After ten minutes, the husband said that he was unable to think of anyone with whom he was angry. "When Martha told me her feelings about anger, I noted that she felt worse than I, because she had anger but I did not. But I knew of my tendency to hide things from myself, so I thought even longer. Suddenly to my consciousness came a scene that I disliked, so I tried to push it from my mind. The more I thought, the more I knew I must tell Martha about it.

"The Mace exercises had given us some helpful advice about how to do this without doing harm to the other person, so I tried.

"'Martha,' I started, 'I don't like what I've just discovered. I have some angry feelings about you. I don't like them. I'm not proud of them. Will you let me tell you what they are without you feeling it is your problem?' She agreed, and I continued to tell her about my emotions, trying not to blame her for them. As soon as I told her my feelings, I discovered that I was harboring other hidden angers, self-pity, and my own frustrations. It took about ten minutes to get it out. When I finished, I found the first freedom from the tremendous tension I had felt for nearly two weeks. We both felt better, had new insights, and felt closer than ever. My inner anger had been sapping my energy, making me a nervous wreck, and had been preventing my enjoyment of life."

So, as Christians, it's all right to be angry. We know that God's all-encompassing love gives us the freedom to admit that we are angry and to express our anger constructively. This is not merely a freedom to sound off, lose our tempers, and go into a tantrum. Nor is the freedom to communicate our anger to others a license to hurt them. Rather it is the freedom to change the situation that causes anger.

Also remember as a Christian that gratitude is an antidote to irritability. We cannot be coiled for anger as long as we are feeling grateful for life. When we cultivate thankfulness and practice it well, then the many irritants in life will not undo us. How can we be on the edge of fury when we are feeling the wonder that we should exist at all? Amen.