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## Just Breathe: Anger

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My father was born to Romanian parents. While they were loving people, they were not emotionally demonstrative. They never raised their voices. They pretty much kept their feelings to themselves.

My mother, on the other hand, was born to a Cuban father and a Scottish mother. They had two modes: highly emotional and sound asleep. They fought with ferocious energy.

So, when my parents got married, they made an agreement. My mother did not want a marriage like her parents, and my father was just fine keeping his emotions in check. So, as a child, I never saw my parents fight. Ever. Never even heard them raise their voices to one another. I don't think they were hiding things from me. It's just the way they operated. In fact, the first time I saw my parents angry with one another I was well into my 20's and I found it oddly amusing – which didn't go over particularly well with them.

While I'm profoundly grateful to have grown up with parents who genuinely loved one another, I also entered my own marriage completely unequipped for healthy conflict. When I'd get angry, I'd stuff it. I'd become cold and distant until my smoldering anger finally died out. Which, my wife, Nancy, could tell you, could take days. It took counseling and continues to require practice for me to handle my anger productively.

Over the years I've learned a lot about anger, including this: when we don't handle our anger well it takes up a lot of room within us. It doesn't leave a lot of margin for things like peace and joy and love. So today, let's learn together how the Spirit can help us to breathe through our anger.

To do that, let's start with a couple of the most important verses of Scripture I know when it comes to the subject of anger. These are from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4, verses 26 & 27:

*"Be angry, but do not sin. Don't let the sun go down on your anger, for anger gives a foothold to the devil."*

If I had understood the first two words of those verses years ago, I could have saved myself a lot of headache and heartache: "Be angry." In other words, being angry isn't a sin. It's a natural human emotion that we all experience. It's OK to feel angry. But I grew up feeling guilty and ashamed if I felt anger. I didn't think that my anger was ever justified, no matter what happened. But St. Paul gives us permission here – be angry! But that permission also carries a caveat – "but don't sin." In other words, being angry isn't a problem. It's what we do with it that matters. It's how we handle it. So, what do you tend to do with your anger?

As I've worked through my own anger issues, and helped others wrestle with theirs, I've observed a few common ways that people tend to deal with their anger.

First, **we stuff it**. We swallow it. We either pretend that we're not angry (when we really are) or we simply hold it inside. Do that often enough and that emotional energy will come out sideways. High blood pressure, anxiety, depression and heart disease are just a few of the ways that our anger manifests itself if we consistently stuff it.

Second, **we vent it**. We just let it all out without any productive purpose. Could be a mean-spirited online comment or blasting a waiter or waitress if the service seems too slow. Venters are like fire-breathing dragons with hiccups. Everyone around them gets burned. Not only does venting tend to damage relationships, but research also shows that it actually increases our negative mood.

So, neither stuffing it nor venting it are helpful or healthy ways to handle our anger. Here are a few better ways to consider.

First, **meditate on it**. Do you ever feel angry, but you're not sure why? This used to happen to me a lot. I'd feel angry, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was that made me angry. In counseling I learned that, especially for men, anger is what's called a "cover" or secondary emotion. That is, it covers over a deeper or seemingly less-acceptable emotion – often fear or hurt. Sitting prayerfully with our anger when it isn't clear why we're angry allows the Spirit to show us what's going on in our heart. If it's really fear or hurt that we're

experiencing, it's more productive to process those feelings than simply working out of our anger.

Second, **harness it**. Anger is some serious emotional energy that can fuel needed action. Imagine that you see injustice in the world, and it angers you. Harness that anger for action to right the wrong. Or imagine that you didn't succeed at some endeavor that was important to you and you're feeling angry with yourself about it. Harness that anger to double down on your effort. Remember the story of Jesus cleansing the temple? The Gospel writers say that he overturned tables and chased people out of the temple courts. As a kid I remember thinking that Jesus was just having a temper tantrum, but in reality, Jesus was righting a wrong, restoring the temple back to a place of prayer. He harnessed his anger to act.

Third, **talk it out**. Want to know how many issues have been resolved in my life through yelling, screaming, blaming and the liberal use of sarcasm? Exactly zero! In fact, those things always make the situation worse. And I'll bet that the same thing has been true in your life. Perhaps the most productive thing we can do with our anger is talk it out, either with a trusted friend or, if it's safe to do so, with the person with whom we're angry. Don't wait for them to make the first move. Remember what Paul said, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." And why? Because that allows bitterness to take root in our hearts.

And here's something I've learned, mostly the hard way – when you go to talk your anger out it's best to enter that conversation with as much curiosity as you can muster. Because if you're like me you tend to walk into those conversations with all sorts of assumptions about why the other person did or said what they did, rather than checking it out first.

Not long ago someone contacted me to schedule an appointment. They said it was urgent and so I juggled my schedule and canceled something I was really looking forward to in order to accommodate this person's schedule. And when the time for that appointment came, they didn't show up. Needless to say, I was ticked. The story I told myself is that their need wasn't all that urgent after all, and so they just blew me off. Fortunately, before I said something I would later regret I learned through a

friend that this person had wanted to talk about their grief because their mother was dying and in fact died just a few hours before our appointment. My anger instantly dissolved and was replaced with a sense of compassion.

The eighth commandment says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." When Martin Luther sought to explain the meaning of that commandment in his small catechism he wrote, "We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him or slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him and explain everything in the kindest way." Those are wise words to hold onto whenever we have the opportunity to talk our anger out.

And finally, if you just can't talk it out, or it isn't safe to do so, **just breathe**. Let the practice of breathing deeply calm your spirit and invite the Spirit of God to fill you with the gift of forgiveness. You might even want to pray for the person or situation and angered you and let the Spirit do the kind of transformational work in you that only the Spirit can do. And while you're at it, ask the Spirit to continue to bear within you the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those are the very tools we need in the toolbox of our heart to handle anger well.

And one more thing. There will be days when you blow this. There will be moments when your anger gets the best of you and you say and do things that you deeply regret, words and actions that only make the situation worse. Welcome to being human. In those moments remember that you've loved and forgiven. Remember that, by God's grace, we are not defined by our failures. You are defined by the One who named you and claimed you in baptism, the God of new beginnings.