

Nov. 17, 2019
Luke 15:11-32
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Anger – Compassion

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

This month I'm doing a series on spiritual challenges. Last week we looked at fear – courage. Today is anger – compassion. Next week we'll consider loneliness – community.

I chose a very familiar biblical story for today. We will be using the translation from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson. You may have learned this as the story of the prodigal son. Prodigal means *spending money or resources freely and recklessly – wastefully extravagant*. As we will hear, the younger son certainly goes through his prodigal time.

Today it is often called the story of the lost son because it is the last in a trio of stories about the lost – lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son, all found in Luke 15. This trio is introduced in this way:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

SERMON

A little survey.
How many of us are oldest children?
How many are youngest?
How many live somewhere in the middle?

In exploring spiritual truths, Jesus often tells stories about nature (like the lost sheep) or our neighbors (the lost coin), which can give us a little bit of emotional distance. But today's story (the lost son) takes the challenge of spiritual maturity right into the heart of family life.

The younger son who was lost by following his own willful desires is found! The father (God if you will) is extravagant in welcoming this son home. Truly an amazing grace – a compassion that knows no bounds. Usually we focus on this relationship.

Today I want to consider the older son – the second lost son. He's lost in his anger. At the end of the story, we're not sure what he will decide to do.

How you respond to today's story may have something to do with your birth order. Over the years, as I've explored this story with dozens of people, I've found that those who are oldest children tend not to like it. In fact, I've found some people get downright angry about the story, just like the older son, with the proverbial cry, *It's not fair*.

I suspect it is this part of the story that we church folk should really grapple with. In the biblical text, the ending of the story brings us right back to those elders of the community - the Pharisees and scribes – those good do-bees of the religious community, the pillars of the church.

As the chapter began, they were angry, complaining that Jesus was welcoming sinners and eating with them. By bringing them face to face with the older son Jesus is effectively saying to them.

Why are you angry? You are always with God and all that is God's is yours. But we have to celebrate that those who have been dead have come to life, those who have been lost are now found!

What will the Pharisees and the scribes do?
What will the oldest son do?
Anger has a hold on them.

Anger is not a bad emotion. The question is what we do with it. Do you have anger or does anger have you?

A Huffington Post blog suggests:

7 easy ways to stop anger

- Exercise
- Use it as motivation to change
- Watch or listen to something funny
- Shift focus
- Meditate
- Do something productive
- Write it out

(Huffington Post, Adam Gilad, 6/16/16)

Those are all good suggestions, but they still keep the focus on you and your own needs and desires. What does it take to shift to a perspective of compassion?

I've told this story before, but it was such an Aha moment for me I'll share it again. A number of years ago, in this congregation, we were struggling to talk with one another about our country's involvement in the Iraq war. It was hard because so many of us got angry in trying to share our perspectives, and we wanted to convince the others that we were right.

So, we hired an outside professional to facilitate a conversation. Over a hundred people showed up. The format was to share only from our own experience/perspective. We were not going to have a debate. That helped.

But even more helpful to me was that the facilitator left 30-60 seconds of silence after each speaker. As people I disagreed with were speaking, I could feel my anger rising. Yet, amazingly in the time of silence after they spoke, my anger at what they had said receded. I found myself focusing more on the person who had said it and what I knew about their story. My capacity for compassion grew in the silence as I focused on the humanity of the other person.

We sometimes think about being compassionate. We might even move down to our heart to feel compassion. But the biblical Greek word that we translate compassion is much more visceral – it means to be moved in your gut. To have compassion is to feel with the other person. In feeling with another person, it's hard to stay in anger.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, who has spent his life practicing and teaching about anger and compassion, puts it this way.

If you are filled with anger, you create more suffering for yourself than for the other person. When you are inhabited by the energy of anger, you want to punish, you want to destroy. That is why those who are wise do not want to say anything or do anything while the anger is still in them. So you try to bring peace into yourself first.

When you are calm, when you are lucid, you will see that the other person is a victim of confusion, of hate, of violence transmitted by society, by parents, by friends, by the environment. When you are able to see that, your anger is no longer there.

(upliftconnect.com/power-of-compassion)

It sounds simple but is so incredibly challenging, which is why we often simply stay with our prejudices and anger. To move from anger to compassion requires a life-time of spiritual practice and practice and practice.

At the end of today's story, it is the older son who is lost – lost in his anger. What will he do? In leaving that question up in the air, Jesus effectively asks the Pharisees and scribes what they will do.

You are angry that the tax collectors and sinners have been welcomed home? Will you stay in your anger – or will you learn the way of compassion and celebrate with us?