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James 1: 19-25

Slow to Anger: An Invitation to Empathy

Prayer...

Introduction:

We are exploring today chapter 4 of our book by Lisa and Mark McMinn, An Invitation to Slow. Chapter 4 focuses on the topic, Slow to Anger: An Invitation to Empathy.

Anger and Empathy are helpful areas for everyone to explore. This chapter certainly hit home for me because one of the areas I think about a lot is how I can connect more to my emotions and how I also can develop more self awareness related to my emotions, so that I show empathy to others.

Mark and Lisa do a nice job in this chapter honoring the emotion of anger as one that can be used in both positive and negative ways.

They reference the poet and philosopher David Whyte who

describes anger as a form of compassion that points us toward what we value. They share the story of Martin Luther King Jr, who used his anger as motivation to pursue peacemaking and justice. King as a 16 year old won an oratory contest by speaking on the topic of the Negro and the Constitution. Then after winning the speech contest, he had to endure being told by a white bus driver to give up his seat for white passengers on the ride back to his home. The bus driver spoke obscenities over him in order to encourage him to move and King later described his emotion on that ride back home, “the angriest I have ever been in my life.” King channeled his anger as a moral emotion that helped him to work for peace, justice, and compassion, but at various times he struggled to maintain a calm and kind spirit. One especially painful experience was after the bombing of his home. Although his wife and children were not injured, King naturally felt strong anger grow inside of him after that traumatic experience.

King reflected later, “I could not get to sleep. While I lay in that quiet front bedroom, with a distant street lamp throwing a reassuring glow through the curtained window, I began to think of the viciousness of people who would bomb my home. I could feel the anger rising when I realized that my wife and baby could have been killed...I was once more on the verge of corroding hatred. And once more I caught myself and said; ‘You must not allow yourself to become bitter.’”

As we hear this story of King, we realize that he had great capacity for empathy despite experiencing great harm to himself and family.

King did not deny his anger but he also did not want bitterness to form in his heart. The goal we all wish to have is to transform our experience of anger from self interest toward some larger moral good.

The invitation is to have our anger lead us ultimately to a spirit of empathy. Mark McMinn shares in this chapter that though he is a psychologist with a natural heart towards empathy, he has struggled

with seasons of unresolved anger that took time and intentional work to bring him into a place of greater freedom and empathy.

Having Mark share vulnerably his own story, made me want to share a little of my own story of anger and empathy with you.

As a pastor and spiritual director, I also feel a natural heart of empathy towards people, but I also have struggled with feelings of anger at different times in my life.

(Share story of Fuller- Anger at needing to resign from my job and gratitude for empathy from BJ and Mark Labberton)

I want encourage us that when we are experiencing anger, it is good to listen to this emotion. In my experience anger is often related also to sadness.

(Example The Adam Project movie- Ryan Reynolds and his younger self talk and his younger self reminds him that he needs to connect with his sadness)

Young Adam: I think... I think it's easier to be angry than it is to be sad. And I guess, when I get older, I forget that there's a difference.

Big Adam: How'd you get to be so smart?

Young Adam: How'd you get to be so dumb?

Other Quote:

Big Adam: [to his younger self] I spent thirty years trying to get away from the me that was you and, I'll tell you what, kid, I hate to say it, but you were the best part all along.

I think the Adam Project reminds me that we all need to love our younger selves. For me, I remember getting angry quite a bit as a kid.

I could be pretty intense. As I grew older, I became a little embarrassed by my anger, but as I mature now I realize my anger

can be an ally to me as long as I learn to not fall into bitterness, but instead to grow empathy and kindness to others.

Our Scripture reading today includes the encouragement from James, the brother of Jesus to be slow to anger.

James 1: 19-20 reads,

19 You must understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, 20 for human anger does not produce God's righteousness.

Mark and Lisa provide practical ways to help handle our anger when our emotions naturally get stirred up. They suggest,

“Rather than asking whether anger is good or bad, we invite you toward another sort of question: How might my response to anger be transformed so that I think more about the welfare of others and less about myself. This is an invitation to empathy, solidarity, and

kindness, where anger sits boldly amid Christian virtues such as faith, hope, and love.”

How reassuring to see our anger as ultimately a way to cultivate empathy. When anger leads us to show love in support of vulnerable people, then we know we are on the right path. When anger gets turned inward in selfish ways and we harm others, we are on the wrong path.

It seems like every day we hear stories of people hurting others through angry actions. Examples include fights in the checkout line and road rage on the oge Tesla vehicles by scratching them with keys. Some people choose to speak negatively about immigrants. Angry actions that lead to violent behaviors that harm others either physically or emotionally are wrong. Anger is positive when it addresses pain in a way that leads to greater healing and compassionate actions of empathy, but anger can also foster bitterness and lead to broken relationships.

For those of us who struggle with anger, there is some good advice offered in this chapter. Therapy or spiritual direction may provide a helpful place to work through your emotions. These environments where counseling occurs provide safe spaces to experience the freedom to lament feelings of sadness and anger. A good therapist or spiritual director is able to provide empathy that can help bring about healing from painful experiences. Anger can be validated, while also allowing it to be released into forgiveness. The psychologist Carl Rogers taught that therapy clients heal when they experience empathy, positive regard, and genuineness.

The chapter ends with a couple of practical ways to process anger and deepen one's experience of empathy.

The REACH Model by Dr. Worthington is mentioned to help with healing and forgiveness. In this model, R stands for Recall the Hurt, E refers to Empathize with the other, A is for the Altruistic gift of forgiving, C is for Commit to ongoing work of forgiveness and H

refers to Hold on to forgiveness when it starts to slip away. The REACH Model has proven to help lead people to greater empathy.

Another spiritual tool is called The Welcome Prayer. Mary Mrozowski is given credit for developing this prayer inspired by the Jesuit Priest Jean Pierre de Caussade . Her teaching emphasized the inclusive love of God. The Welcome Prayer was developed by Mary Mrozowski to fulfill her yearning to relate deeply with God, find healing for her wounds, and to help her forgive. Quoting now from the description of Welcoming Prayer let's explore the different steps.

Step 1: Notice: Stop and notice whatever it is you're experiencing in this moment. Don't hold back and just give the spiritually acceptable answer. If you're feeling angry or envious, or hopeless, notice that honestly. Perhaps you can even locate your experience in a particular part of your body. Does your gut get queasy or your throat or chest tighten? Do you feel tension in your shoulders when

you allow yourself to experience the negative emotion you are welcoming?

Step 2: Welcome. Offer a simple welcome to whatever it is you're feeling. 'Welcome, anger.' 'Welcome, sadness.' Whatever your experience in this moment, welcome it and recognize that God is with you.

Step 3: Let Go. Just as you have welcomed your current experience, now let it go. You have welcomed your anger and seen Christ with you in the midst of it, but it doesn't need to control you. Simply say, 'I let go of my anger.' It will come back eventually, and you can welcome it again, but for now just let it move on through your awareness and go on its way."

This brave prayer is another powerful way to bring your anger before God and allow it to be transformed into empathy.

I hope this exploration into anger and empathy awakens in each of us a grace filled longing to find greater healing and wholeness not by denying our feelings but by bringing them before God and allowing them with God's help to be transformed into deeper experiences of love and compassion. Friends in a few weeks, we will remember the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus during Holy Week and Easter. Jesus chose the way of suffering and forgiveness rather than bitterness and anger. What anger he did have was transformed into compassion and even empathy for his oppressors. He also stood in solidarity and empathy with the oppressed. May we follow the way of Jesus. May we embody love and empathy in our world. Let us pray together.

James 1:19-25

19 You must understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, 20 for human anger does not produce God's righteousness.[a] 21

Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

22 But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves[b] in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.