

love. Anger that is tamed by love, patience, and a yearning for the common good can result in something beautiful.

Ephesians says when we're angry, we should not let any evil talk come out of our mouths. We are to say only what is good for building up, so that our words may give grace to all who hear them. And, just like God doesn't hold anger forever, we are to let go of ours, too: don't let the sun go down on your anger, Paul said. Anger on its own is likely to harm. But anger—when we patiently realize that it stems from pain or injustice or fear—can urge us toward better solutions. And anger that's entwined with steadfast love? Well, that sounds like a spiritual practice that can motivate us to reconcile relationships that have soured, or revisit problematic issues, or take the first step to make amends. Whether it's through words or actions, anger can help us identify what we can do to give grace, create justice, and live in love.

Back in the peony garden, with a bit more patience and love added to the mix, could a different result have been possible? Instead of cut flowers, could there have been a viral video to raise awareness comparing the number of blooms to the number of lives lost in Gaza? Could the gardeners have invited the protestors to create a piece of art among the flowers to draw attention to the issue? We don't always know what's possible. These are complicated topics. Just like our own anger toward the world and people we love is also very complicated. But as people of faith, we commit to using our whole selves—our love, our anger, our patience, our motivations—never to tear down, but always to build up.

And so we give all glory and honor, thanks and praise to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

July 27, 2025

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
"Anger: A Faithful Spiritual Practice?"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Psalm 103:6-12 and Ephesians 4:25-29

Last month on June 1, hundreds of flowers were in bloom at the Upjohn Peony Garden at Nichols Arboretum in Ann Arbor. But overnight, people broke into the garden and cut about 250 of the beautiful blooms, leaving the now lifeless plants littered all over the ground.¹ People wait all year to see the gorgeous peonies in their glory. So staff and patrons of the garden were devastated by the loss; many of them were angry. "It takes a psychopath to do this," one responded in outrage. What a pointless waste it seemed, to steal the beauty of these flowers from so many people.

But as I dug deeper into this story, the anger involved became more complex. It turned out that vandalism had also been done as an act of protest. Papers left behind in the garden stated that at peak season, the garden boasts something like 10,000 flowers in bloom; and that more than 50,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza since the devastation in Israel on October 7, 2023. The paper said "Palestinian lives deserve to be cared for. More than these flowers."² Whatever your views, everyone in this situation was angry: the vandals or activists were angry about the thousands of people, and far too many children, who've been killed; the gardeners and garden enthusiasts were angry that a joyful place had been ruined, with very little to show for it. Anger seemed only to cause harm in every direction.

Because of situations like this, anger is definitely not something we typically consider a Christian virtue or a spiritual practice. Paul mentioned anger in his letter to the Ephesians: be angry, but do not sin. He acknowledged anger as a reality—one that needs to be managed and dealt with carefully. Anger is a fact of life. It's a natural reaction to some things we experience, though one that easily bends toward sin if we let it. For anger to become a spiritual practice that helps us through storms, we are called to interact with it differently and to use it for God's good purposes.

Preacher Carol Holbrook Prickett says, "Practicing anger as a spiritual discipline means learning to *listen* to our anger. Anger is a wonderful tool

1 Viewed on the Facebook page of the Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum <https://www.facebook.com/mbgna>, viewed on June 1 and June 2, 2025.

2 Carol Thompson, "Pro-Palestinian messages left at scene of flower vandalization, UM policy say," The Detroit News, June 1, 2025, updated June 2, 2025, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2025/06/01/vandals-damaged-250-peony-plants-university-michigan-nichols-arboretum-garden/83982842007/>

3 Qtd. in "The Blue Room" newsletter by MaryAnn McKibben Dana, June 27, 2025.

for clarifying our values. We do not get angry about things we do not care about.” When we really listen to our anger and seek to understand what’s driving it, we can align our own values with God’s values. We draw closer to the way of Jesus who always stood for justice, compassion, and dignity for all.

Like I told the kids, even Jesus felt anger. When he came into the temple ahead of his arrest, he saw people buying and selling animals to make sacrifices. He saw money-changers. And he was angry. Because of the economic transactions happening in God’s house. And because of the way this system took advantage of the poor, asking them to use their few pennies to purchase animals for sacrifices. By his dramatic response, Jesus wanted to make the situation right. He sought a fairer system for the poor. He demanded respect for what was holy.

So we can be sure Jesus felt anger. But not just that. To understand anger as a human emotion, the Gottman Institute has popularized the image of an *anger iceberg*. The idea is that anger—yelling, raised voices, stomping feet—all of that is the part of anger that we *see* above the waves. Just like when the tip of an iceberg emerges through the waves in the ocean. But the biggest part of an iceberg is actually what’s under the surface, pushing it up. So below the waves of our visible upset are other feelings, which are the cause of our anger: frustration, disappointment, pain, jealousy, loneliness, fear, concern for others. Anger tells us that there’s some other issue under the surface: something needs to be fixed or someone needs to be protected. Anger is often a warning that some meaningful and important value we hold is at stake. For Jesus, he was pained by what he saw in the temple and his anger was a tool for justice. He was dramatic in his actions, but turning over those tables was meant to set things right. And the actions didn’t seem to frighten; right away, in Matthew’s telling, people sought out Jesus in search of healing. When we understand that our anger can reveal other feelings and injustices, then we can recognize and channel it properly to help us through our storms; rather than letting it be the storm itself.

If anger can be a proper response to injustice and inequity, it follows that God must feel angry, too. God’s heart must be pained to see the mess we humans make of things all the time. Yet the scriptures say God is *slow to anger*. God doesn’t rush to rage or fury; God is patient, giving us time to realize our mistakes, to correct our ways, to heal, to make amends. Even as anger can help clarify our values, it makes sense for us, too, that being slow to anger is a virtue. It’s a spiritual activity we can practice so that when anger arises, we have more time to consider how to use it wisely;

we have the space to allow it to motivate and shape our actions, but not dictate them.

I have a friend, Jessica, who pastors a church in the Washington, D.C. area. The primary employer in her area is the federal government. Jessica has been busy these past months with pastoral care for church members whose jobs or research funding have recently ended. When some pastors recently met to check in together, Jessica told them, “I know some folks who are pretty ‘hair on fire’ right now... though interestingly, they’re often not the ones most directly affected by what’s going on.”³ Those who are at a distance from shake-ups that are happening seem to have more luxury to be offended, revved up, and even consumed by those things. Those hair-on-fire people are feeling “hot anger.” They have been, perhaps, quick to anger. Jessica compared them to the people she knows who are demonstrating “cold anger.” Which might be more akin to being slow to anger; this is a more patient and controlled emotion. Cold anger is a term from community organizing that sees anger as fuel for the work that needs to be done. Cold anger is not all over the place complaining and screaming about what’s wrong. Cold anger is focused on making a plan, on seeing what you can really achieve and change. Folks who have taken the time to channel their feelings into a cooler anger are disciplined in their response to hard or even unjust situations: they know what they can impact and what they can’t. They are using their energy and motivation in ways that try to care for their spirits and make a real difference.

When it comes to public issues, I wonder if young people might be better than adults at distinguishing between hot and cold anger? I think of stories where a kid encounters a problem: something unfair in their school or town that makes them angry; but their focus moves right to solving it. Like the kids who learn about school lunch debt that shames their friends. They organize, raise money, and pay off a big chunk of bills so kids at their school no longer have to worry about that burden. Or the girl who saw that other kids don’t have the school supplies they need. So instead of raging about the unfairness of it, for her birthday each year, she asks for backpacks to give away instead of gifts for herself. She’s given over a thousand backpacks to help kids in her community get what they need.⁴ Yes, we all know that kids (and adults!) are sometimes wild and illogical with their anger. But these kids’ anger has become focused, disciplined, and patient. They don’t sit around stewing or worrying or wondering about things that are terrible. They believe it is possible to live by their values and to help set things right. Maybe that’s cold anger. Maybe it’s slow and patient anger. But I think it is also anger that’s all mixed up with steadfast