

Sunday, March 4, 2018

Central Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon



A Sermon Preached by
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Anger in the Temple

John 2:13-25

We live in angry times. Students are angry at adults who will not protect them in their schools. The Occupy movement is angry with an economy of the one percent and Women have channeled their anger into marches and the #metoo movement.

Do we not think that this anger is justified? I certainly do!

But anger is almost never talked about in the church. The “niceness” that Christians have taken to be our highest calling has us regularly avoiding conflicts both large and small, leaving us bereft of the skills to distinguish between petty acrimony and righteous anger, between misplaced indignation, and anger as a response to injustice.

But let’s not try to deny Jesus’ anger as if this is an unusual story. It is not. This is not the only time that Jesus get angry. He curses a fig tree that never bears fruit. There is another story about a man with a withered hand who has approached Jesus on the Sabbath; his critics wait to see if he will violate the commandment by healing the man on the Sabbath. Mark says that Jesus “looked on them in anger” before making the man whole.

In both of these instances, Jesus anger seems larger than personal indignation. It is not about the law, it is not about a creed, it is about a human suffering. Christ saw the temple violated by money changers; the Pharisees saw the Sabbath violated by Christ.

The difference is that in both instances, Christ saw that the needs of hurting people must come before the letter of the law.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus calls the temple a “den of thieves,” suggesting that it was financial abuse—outright theft to which he objected. Payday loans, College Loans, discriminatory mortgage loan practices that exclude black and favor whites, Economic tax laws that favor the rich at the expense of the poor. Remember these words of the Prophet Amos, “For the three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.” Micah calls out “those who covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them.” And Habakkuk cries, Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion!”

John’s complaint is slightly different. “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace! This is important because the buying and selling of sacrificial animals for religious practice was causing some people to be left out. If you didn’t have the money to buy unblemished animals for sacrifice you were denied the saving grace that was bestowed through such sacrifice. This made Jesus furious! The grace of God is a free gift and religious institutions were perverting religious practice by excluding those who could not pay. The Protestant Reformation was

sparked in part by the church selling indulgences – by promising the grace of God’s forgiveness for a fee. Martin Luther was furious with this practice!

So let’s get over the idea that anger is not appropriate in the church. But let us also be clear that, while anger’s passion is a gift, it can be used for good or ill. Paul says to the Ephesians, “Be angry but do not sin!” When anger’s passion is turned on another to advance one’s own privilege it can be the instrument of oppression or injustice.

When anger is felt because it identifies with someone else’s oppression it can become the energy, motivation and determination to work for justice—for liberating the oppressed and providing release for captives. When anger is righteous it leads us to work for the life and love of those in the grip of death and alienation, disconnection and isolation. In this temple story Jesus means to liberate the poor from the oppression of religious institutional privilege. This is my father’s house; here grace is freely given to all--not just to those who can access the systems of power. Not just those who can pay for sacrificial animals.

Religious institutions like political and corporate institutions often envisage power under images that suggest domination and control as the central modes of human activity, as if political or military conquest were the noblest expressions of the human power to act. Might I suggest that anger expressed as political threats to blow another country off the face of the earth, or the NRA attacking traumatized students as crisis actors amplifying their victimization, or women sexually harassed by corporate cultures of domination and control is anger in the service of oppression.

However, the passion of anger can also signal that something is not right. It can motivate us to work for

justice. It can drive liberation, promote human dignity, and build human community. That is what the students are looking for. The grief and trauma have made them angry. They know that something is not right. And they are channeling that anger into a political call to right the wrong so that this violence doesn’t continue to grow. That is what the women’s marching and the #metoo movement is about. They know something is not right and they are using their anger to right this wrong. That is what the Occupy Movement is trying to do. They know something is not right and they are using their anger to right the wrong.

Garret Keizer, in his book *The Enigma of Anger*, reminds us that anger is natural. Like love the feeling is neutral. Our actions are what determines righteousness or wickedness. Keizer writes:

I am writing in petulant resistance to the idea that anger is an emotion with no rightful place in the life of a Christian or in the emotional repertoire of any evolved human being... Darwin saw us linked with the animals, and therefore to the material creation as a whole; so do the Old and New Testaments. But the popular theology (most of it Gnostic) that portrays perfection as the shedding of every primitive instinct, and portrays God as an impersonal sanitizing spirit, is to my mind evidence of a satanic spirit. The Lord my God is a jealous God and an angry God, as well as a loving God and a merciful God. I am unable to imagine one without the other. I am unable to commit to any messiah who doesn’t knock over tables.

Feelings of anger and feelings of love are not polar opposites. Anger alerts us to the fact that something is not right, that love is not being realized.

Beverly Harrison, a respected feminist theologian reminds us that “being and doing must [also] never

be treated as polarities. Receiving community as a gift and doing the work of community building are two ways to view the same activity. Being angry can lead to life or it can thwart life and lead us to maim each other. "The fateful choice is ours, either to set free the power of God's love in the world or to deprive each other of the very basis of personhood and community. This power of human activity, so crucial to the divine-human drama, is not the power of world conquest or empire building, nor is it control of one person by another. We are not the most godlike in our human power when we take the view from the top, the view of rulers, or of empires, or the view of patriarchs."

There are no right and wrong feelings. Love and anger are closely aligned as are being and doing. The feeling of Love when acted out in self-interest is known as narcissism and it destroys the dignity of others, but when love feels for the neighbor it is considered a fulfillment of the command of God, acknowledges the worth of the other, and acts to give life abundant to the other.

Anger, when expressed out of self-interest, destroys others through control, dominance, and violence. Yet anger that gives rise to constructive behavior, even when dismantling oppressive systems and institutions, can pave the way for greater community, liberation, and life. Jesus action in the temple resembles the prophetic tradition which recognizes injustice, calls for repentance, and reminds us that we can live and move and have our being and doing enveloped in the grace of God.

The location of this text in the season of Lent gives us, the followers of Jesus, something to ponder in our own struggles to discern whether our feelings of anger stem from self-interest or love of neighbor. Anger as a feeling is neutral but how we use our anger, as how we use love, determines

righteousness or wickedness. However, just as we need to take care not to polarize "being and doing," God's love and God's anger, let's be careful not to polarize grace and works. Often we make the mistake of thinking that we earn our salvation by what we do but Jesus "doing" reflects his "being" — They are of the same cloth. His love for those who are oppressed, and God's freely given grace motivate Jesus to cleanse the Temple.

In this story Jesus is angry because the mercy, justice, and salvation that are God's free gift for all was being hijacked by commerce in the temple. He seeks to tear down the structures of oppression and injustice so that grace can be restored.

Sadly, his own willing, faithful, obedience to justice and grace was the obedience that led him to the cross. John puts the words foreshadowing his crucifixion in Jesus mouth... "tear down this temple and I will raise it up in three days." They thought he was talking about the temple building but he was talking about his own death and resurrection — the liberation of the human spirit from the oppression of death. This God is a life-giving God. It comes through grace and love and even anger.

Jesus chases the moneychangers out of the temple because he experienced a visceral injustice taking place in his father's house. His father's house was to be a place where people were liberated by grace not enslaved by commerce--where they could truly worship not get caught in a world where wealth was the key to salvation. Many were feeling oppressed by the burden of commerce. Jesus feels anger, but it inspires an action to liberate the temple and restore God's free grace, to remove the barriers of poverty, especially in the Temple where all people should be able to worship freely and know God's salvation. But what happens in the Temple is a reflection of what should happen in the marketplace. None were supposed to live without access to the bounty of God's providence. Cleansing the Temple was the

prelude to cleansing society. The Roman Empire had a different vision of God's providence. Caesar was god and power belonged to the Empire. They crucified Christ as a testament to their truth but in three days a New Testament was born in the resurrection of Christ.

Does the church understand the righteousness gift of anger? Does the church understand Jesus in the prophetic tradition? Does the church use the gift of anger to liberate others? And how are you doing with your anger? Does it lead to willing faithful actions of justice and life-giving liberation for others or is it only about you? Something to think about this Lenten season. Will you follow in Jesus footsteps, willing to give your life for your friends? That is what the liberation of the temple cost Jesus.

And that's what is before us as we make our way, step by step, toward Holy Week.

Let us pray:

Lord of all faithfulness, God of free grace, give us a holy and righteous anger whenever and wherever we encounter the oppression of others. Especially in the church, let us be sensitive to creeds, expectations, and religious practices that stand in the way of others receiving your free grace. Let us accept the gift of anger with neutrality and use it to promote righteousness rather than sin. As we walk in the footsteps of Jesus let us cleanse for the purpose of healing, dismantle for the purpose of construction, and, as Jesus, always and in everything, open the way to life. Amen.