

Lent 3

March 7, 2021

## **Righteous Anger**

### **John 2:13-22**

Here are two quick questions: What makes you angry? And are you angry about the right things? Several passages of scripture — including what we read today from John's gospel — suggest that sometimes anger isn't just necessary and righteous, it can also be the proper response to conditions on the ground.

An early example of such a passage comes in the Noah flood story. It says God saw that humanity had become thoroughly evil. In fact, the Lord regretted making human beings and was heartbroken about it. So, God said this: "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created ...." Killing off all of humanity could fit the description of an act done in anger, right?

But because God saw Noah as a righteous man in the midst of all this wickedness, the story says God spared him. God's anger was triggered not by divine self-centeredness, greed or covetousness. Rather, it was triggered by disgust over humanity's malevolent thoughts and deeds. So, God was angry about the right things, even if some of us might wonder whether the punishment fit the crime.

In the temple cleansing story in today's reading, we find that Jesus was angry

at least in part because God's house was being desecrated. For a modern parallel, imagine what Jesus might think about us — and what he might do — if we turned our sacred space into a combination casino, discount liquor store and brothel.

There's more going on in the temple-cleansing story than concern about disrespecting sacred space, but the place to start is with the idea that the word "sanctuary" means it is holy space. What was happening just outside the temple's sanctuary, however, was that poor people were being ripped off as they sought to change the cash they brought with them into the kind of money required to purchase animals for sacrifice in the temple.

Jesus wanted people treated fairly, which wasn't happening, and it made him angry. But beyond that, his action was a reminder of earlier Jewish prophets who had warned people that God doesn't even want or need such sacrifices. Isaiah, for instance, quotes God as saying, "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats ... bringing offerings is futile." And Hosea says that even though people "offer choice sacrifices, though they eat flesh, the LORD does not accept them." The message of Jesus was that God wanted not barbequed doves but, rather, the dedicated hearts of the people.

There's something else going on in the temple-cleansing story, but to figure out what we need to turn to the Gospel of Mark's version of the story. There, after Jesus turned over the tables used for currency exchange, he quoted the

prophet Isaiah, who, in turn, was quoting God: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations.”

Almost any time you see the word “nations” in the New Testament, it refers to non-Jews, Gentiles. So, in this case, Jesus seems to be addressing the fact that all this buying and selling of animals for temple sacrifice was going on in what was called the Court of the Gentiles, which was the outer space in the temple. From the outside to the inside, there was the Court of the Gentiles, then the Court of the Women, then the Court of the Israelites, then the Court of the Priests.

If Gentiles were there to pray — which happened often enough that such Gentiles were given the name God-fearers — they were restricted to the Court of the Gentiles. In that court, the noisy marketing of animals made it almost impossible to think, much less pray. In other words, the system wasn’t set up to be a good neighbor to non-Jews, despite the repetitive teaching that Jews were always and everywhere to welcome the stranger.

Well, this familiar New Testament story leads us to challenging questions for our time. The first two I’ve already asked:

What makes you angry and are you angry about the right things? And it’s important to think through whether we’re angry about the most important thing first before being angry about some secondary thing.

For instance, last year, when a Minneapolis police officer killed an unarmed black man named George Floyd, sparking nationwide protests and even riots, one response from some people went like this: “I’m sorry Floyd died, but tearing down cities must stop.” That got things backwards. To be like Jesus, our response should have been closer to this: “I’m sorry rioters are destroying property, but police officers must stop killing defenseless black people.”

Do you see that the second response puts the emphasis on the precious value of human life over the value of property? (That said, I am not condoning rioting, especially that which injures and kills people, but I am emphasizing how I believe Jesus would respond — in favor of people rather than property.)

Beyond figuring out whether we’re angry about the right things, we need to think about our personal and communal responsibility to fix whatever made us angry. For instance, to go back to the Floyd case for a minute, do we understand the ways in which the idea of white supremacy, which was enshrined in our nation’s founding documents, continues to shape our culture today? And once we begin to grasp that, what are we to do about it?

Truly righteous anger is often a response not to some individual slight or disagreement but, rather, to some systemic breakdown. For instance, if our public educational system isn’t offering quality instruction to all students, no matter their race, gender or economic status, we need more than volunteers to tutor individual students. We need a societal commitment to provide the

funding and policies that will achieve that quality education for all.

The same is true for almost any societal system you can name, perhaps starting with health care. If our current system isn't working for everyone in a fair and equitable way, our righteous anger should drive us to look for a systemic answer rather than simply helping to pay for one individual's medical bills out of the goodness of our heart. The latter response helps one person. The former one helps all.

In the Jerusalem temple, Jesus got angry not at individual money changers or dove sellers. Rather, he got angry at the whole system. His goal was to clear the decks and start again in a way that would honor God and God's holiness, not mock it by cheating people as they tried to get access to animals to sacrifice to a God who didn't really want such sacrifices anyway.

He said to the dove sellers, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" And he reminded them of what that Father had said through the Prophet Isaiah: "... my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

So, Jesus was angry about the right things. And he was trying to fix what he accurately diagnosed as a broken system that exploited poor and innocent people. In cleansing the temple, Jesus was putting anger into action on behalf of the downtrodden, the people being taken advantage of unfairly.

If Jesus was angry about the economic exploitation of the poor, shouldn't we

be, too? If Jesus was angry about something that was undermining people's faith in God, shouldn't such an attack upset us, too?

Yes, we need to be careful and not let our anger turn to violence, especially against other humans. You may think Jesus went too far in overturning the tables in the temple, but it helps to remember that he seems not to have injured anyone physically. You might think of it as a bit of dramatic street theater to make an important point.

For us, the point is to remember that sometimes anger is exactly the right response when we see systems that oppress the very people for whom Christ died. But once we express that anger, our obligation is to propose solutions and work for their adoption instead of walking away in a huff. Stomping off is anger wasted.

So, don't be angry that the restaurant overcooked your steak. Rather, be angry that the single mother waiting on your table must hold this second job to make ends meet because being a middle school English teacher doesn't pay her enough to support her family. Those are the kinds of things that would make Jesus angry. And that's what Jesus would try to fix.