

Jesus: A Social Prophet

Text: John 2:13-22

Prayer: Let my words speak God's truth and may they move each listener's heart for reflection and for action. Amen.

A man by the name of Theo spent three years working in the poor sector of an urban city. He was confronted with issues of poverty, homelessness, addiction, racism, sexism and the misery of people who live in desperate situations. One day Theo decided that he was going to go to a theological college to be a minister. The Church Board asked him to be interviewed by the Regional Council Education and Students Committee. On his interview day, the chair asked him, "What is your call?" And he replied "outrage". The chair responded, "No, no, what's your real call?" And, again, Theo replied "outrage."

For most Christians, being angry, especially in church is not acceptable. We were taught even at a young age that anger is the very opposite of the virtues of love, patience, gentleness, and forgiveness. Some of us have great difficulty with the idea of an angry, wrathful, violent God depicted in the Hebrew scripture. And if we have difficulty with the idea of an angry God, it is even more ludicrous for us to think of Jesus as someone who lost his temper in an angry fit.

Over the centuries, artistic depictions of Jesus were intentionally devoid of humour or negative emotions such as anger. They were usually sombre, serious and solemn: Jesus praying in the garden; Jesus holding the little lamb; Jesus knocking on a door, to name a few. So when we encounter an angry Jesus in our gospel story today, with some kind of a "temple tantrum" as Lorrie puts it, when he overturns the tables and driven out the money changers and animal vendors. we were overwhelmed, surprised, shocked – with a possible reaction of "I can't believe Jesus could have done this!" After all, we were taught that Jesus was supposed to be meek and mild, soft-spoken, kind and gentle. He taught us to turn the other cheek and love even our enemies.

To be honest, I feel a sense of relief when I hear this particular story in John. For here is Jesus reacting as anyone might react in a situation where justice is the demand of the day and requires

something must be done rather than being silent. He was outraged! This story makes me say. “Bravo Jesus!! You are a human like us after all!!” This passage, known as “Jesus Cleanses the Temple” is, I think, a misrepresented title. The truth is, it’s about anger - a holy, just and righteous anger, that was his motivation for his action. It was the prophetic side of Jesus that compelled him to claim his values and live them out—thus making it a powerful story.

Jesus' disruption that day in the temple was a sign of Jesus' disagreement of the way things were. But what made Jesus angry? Didn't he realize that when he entered Jerusalem – it was the holiest time of the year for the Jewish people? It was the Passover Festival which drew thousands of pilgrims to pay their homage in the temple; people in the temple courts were only doing what was required of them to do under Jewish law. They were buying and selling animals for the purpose of offering God a sacrifice in the temple. It was inconvenient for the pilgrims to bring their own animal sacrifices, as they travelled from far distance for the Passover. The money changers were necessary because the people couldn't use the Roman money, which had the inscription of the emperor on it. They needed to exchange the Roman currency for the Jewish shekel, which was used to support the temple priests as well as the maintenance of the temple with a temple tax. As a social prophet, Jesus proceeds to make his political and religious statement in an unorthodox way. Jesus interrupts “business as usual” for the sake of justice and holiness. He interrupts *worship* as usual for the sake of justice and holiness. His love for God, the temple, and its people compels him to righteous anger. So what made Jesus so angry?

Here's a good answer. BECAUSE THE PEOPLE HAD LOST THE ORIGINAL SENSE OF WHAT THE TEMPLE STOOD FOR. According to Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, the temple developed a theology connecting this world to its source in God. As the mediator of forgiveness and purification, the temple mediated access to God and became a centre of devotion. This was what the temple originally stood for. When Jerusalem fell into the hands of the Roman Empire in 63 BCE, the temple became the centre of a domination system that oppresses the people: rule by a few, economic exploitation and religious legitimation. A very angry Jesus drove them out, overturned tables with a whip of cords because he objected to the outward show of loyalty to Rome, or offering animal sacrifice without the corresponding purity

of heart. The Temple for Jesus represented Israel's identity and spiritual dignity; it was not merely a place to worship, but a powerful, proud symbol of the spiritual and physical existence of the people. Now it became a marketplace, a consumers' paradise devoid of any pure intent of worshipping God. It is no wonder that Jesus came up with the kind of righteous anger he expressed. It was an appropriate response to the presence of injustice boiling in the heart of Jesus.

Like Jesus, can we be justified in our righteous anger? I think of those protesters and advocates who voiced their grievances to the powers-that-be siding with the poor, the homeless, those who have no access to health care and education? What about the anger displayed by those seeking justice for murdered indigenous or black or LGBTQ2S+ people? Do they have a right to their anger and to expressing it in the ways they do? What about the people of Ukraine, Russia, Gaza and Israel, do they have the right to march on the streets in an outrage protests because of unjust wars and murder of innocent people? What about us here in church- when we display our remorse or disagreements over some issues? Do we have a right to express anger despite the fact that church people are taught to be nice and loving? And what about the display of anger by women of the Democratic Republic of Congo and other places in Africa when women and young girls were targets of violent rape, and school girls were taken and used as sexual slaves? Ought we not to display such emotion because anger makes us wild and un-Christian? Beverly Wildung Harrison wrote an essay about the power of anger and this is what she says: *“Where anger rises, there the energy to act is present....We must never lose touch with the fact that all serious human moral activity, especially action for social change, takes its bearings from the rising power of human anger. Such anger is a signal that change is called for, that transformation in relation is required.”*¹

Jesus as a social prophet taught us that anger for anger's sake is worthless. But anger, if it is holy and righteous and motivates us for justice, love and compassion, is a valuable expression of our hope for a new, whole, and healed community of God's people. Jesus' display of anger was a holy and righteous response because he was one whose whole being is illuminated in God's light, and who therefore naturally acts with justice and compassion. When we are angry

¹ "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers", pp. 13-14.

as a righteous response to evil or injustice, then anger may become the work of liberating grace in our relationships and in our relation to the injustices of the world. Viktor Frankl says it powerfully that those who must shed light must endure burning with passion fueled by righteous anger.

When asked to justify his violent actions with a sign, Jesus responded with an enigmatic aphorism: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." Traditional interpretations taught us that: "He's talking about the new temple, his own body, which will be killed but will rise again in three days." But here's another way of looking at this text: God chose to localize love and justice in a human body. John's theology of an incarnated God is present here. God becoming human through Jesus leads us to profess that the new temple is not made of bricks and mortar but one with flesh and blood. Jesus was not speaking of the literal destruction of the temple place where God dwells, but the destruction of the myth that God only dwells in such impressive building. Jesus is moving God out of the four walls of the building into the world. Rev. Dr. Peter Samuelson inspires us with his words: "Jesus came/ to not just destroy the temples we build to serve ourselves / but to raise up a new temple for us,/ a temple in which we can truly be reconciled to God. / God's divine love lives in each one of us through the grace which is extended to us today, even as that grace blessed the righteous angry Jesus as he turned over the tables for the sake of justice and compassion.

On this Annual General Meeting when we gather as the body of Christ, remember that we are called to embody God's love, compassion and justice in those places we are called to be. We are the body of Christ. Be bold. Be vigilant. Express your righteous and holy anger and make the world tremble with love, compassion and justice. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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