

3rd SUNDAY IN LENT
March 4, 2018

Text: John 2:13-22

Theme: Righteous Indignation

It is the 3rd Sunday in Lent and we continue our quest to discover the true nature of God in our assigned lessons. So far in our studies, we have encountered a benevolent God who showers his people with his mercy and steadfast love. Last week we were introduced to an all-powerful God who (in the form of his Son) performed miracles and cast out demons. But all of these wonderful characteristics of God were soon overshadowed by the words of Christ as he spoke of his impending death. It changed the God of glory into a suffering God. It changed our understanding of what it means to be his follower.

As we will see this morning, what started out as an incredible journey with the Messiah is turning slowly into a much more difficult walk. In the other three gospels the story of Jesus cleansing the temple is part of the passion narrative, but the author of John places it at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. The disciples were just called, and they attended a wedding where Jesus turned six jars of water into the very best of wines. But the scene shifts dramatically as they now arrive in Jerusalem and walk into the temple. Earlier the grace and glory of Christ pointed the people to an abundant new life. Now we see the challenge and threat the new life poses for those who do not hear his message as good news.

It is always the prerogative of the one standing in this pulpit to read each lesson carefully and to choose which text to preach on, and this is one I avoid normally because it makes me uneasy to think about Jesus taking up a whip of cords to drive everyone (and everything) out of the temple. I can hear the crack of the whip as he scatters the animals out of the room. I can hear the clank of coins as they spill to the ground when the tables are overturned.

It is not exactly the image we have in mind when we talk about our Lord and Savior. It is not the image of the one who goes out of his way to find a lost sheep or who stands among the people and weeps with those who mourn.

But if we are earnest in our desire to know fully the God we worship then I believe we need to struggle with this text.

It is clear that Jesus is angry but anger (in and of itself) is not assigned a value until we act it out. Unfortunately, most of our examples of anger are considered to be negative. I hear the word *anger* and it takes me back to Chicago where my family lived through the racial riots. I was too young to fully understand what was taking place in our quiet neighborhood. The one thing I knew was that everyone was visibly upset with everyone else and nothing seemed to make it right. And how people expressed their anger frightened me (and still does).

Our news is filled with angry voices about a myriad of issues. And in some ways we have come to expect it out there in the world but not in the church. We have a higher standard for our behavior inside our church walls. What happens in our schools should not take place in here. How we speak to one another out there should not be the way we speak to each other in here. The church is to be different.

What exactly made Jesus so mad in that church?

Was it because Jesus saw the temple transformed into a marketplace?

That does not seem to be it because our understanding of that time period suggests that it was a common practice for devout Jews (who were traveling long distances) to purchase their animals for sacrifices at the temple. So once again we have to ask:

What exactly made Jesus so mad?

We glean from reading all four gospels that Jesus was angry because the religious leaders were making concessions and accepting bribes that corrupted the temple. It was to be a place where people could come and legitimately receive a proper offering. It was not to be a place where people got ripped off. Jesus challenged the whole system as well as the abuse.

The temple and our houses of worship are to be sanctuaries and the anger we see Jesus express in this lesson should get our attention. It should make us think about our own churches and whether (or not) what we do and how we act in here demonstrates to God and others that we truly worship him alone.

It should bring to mind the fury of Martin Luther as he named the abuses he saw in the church during the time of the Reformation. And after more than 20 years of ministry I too have experienced the church at its best and at its worst. I have seen church treasurers being arrested for the mismanagement of church funds. The scandals of the church over sexual abuses finally became national news after decades of keeping it a secret.

In the first congregation I served we hung a large banner outside our building to announce to the whole community that we were a *Safe Haven for Children*. The banner came from the national church and the words came from a resolution that was adopted at a church-wide assembly to proclaim to the world that our churches could provide protection and shelter to all children. It told others that we could offer a safe environment. But at some point we took the sign down because we were challenged by the simplicity of its message.

Could we really guarantee that our church would keep every child safe at all times? The answer was no. We could do our very best and we could have the very best intentions but it was not a promise that we could keep. We could put into place as many policies and safety precautions as possible (all of which are good and right to do) but we could not guarantee that we would be free of sin.

As much as we would like to think otherwise, our gospel gives us much to think about because Jesus is doing more than cleansing the temple. Jesus is letting us know that our houses of worship need to be just that ... a house to worship. We have to work together to ensure that all that we do in here centers on our worship of God. And when we encounter anything that takes us away from that then we too need to be cleansed.

The author of John places this story early in his gospel because he wants to establish the authority of Jesus long before Jesus carries his cross out of the gates of Jerusalem. He wants us to know that (in the changing of water to wine and in challenging a system that was in need of renewal) Jesus is the one who bears witness to the power of God in the world. His bold and prophetic act in the temple reinforces what he has already shown us: Jesus is the real presence of God on earth and the authority of the church rests with God alone.

It makes me uneasy to talk to you about a God that can get angry. We want to look away when the face of God becomes the least bit clouded. We only want to hear that God is love. Well the good news is that I can still tell you that God is love. God loves us enough to get angry with us when we are bent on self-destruction or when we use our power to lord it over others.

And as a result of this cleansing of the temple, Jesus leaves room for a new temple, a temple in which we can truly be reconciled to God. In the body of Christ, God offers us a temple where we can receive the forgiveness of sin, where we can worship the one true God and be free from our bondage to sin and death.

It is important for us to know God in his anger. Studying only those parts of the Bible that we cherish will lead us to an incomplete and inadequate understanding of God. Today we embrace the fullness of God through Christ. God is a jealous God, jealous for our own good. God wants us to serve him alone, and not serve the other gods in our lives. God wants us to worship him alone, and to dwell in the temple of his love and forgiveness. Soon we will hear the angry cries of the people who want to crucify him but their efforts will be in vain. Not even an empty tomb will contain our God. Amen