

Come, Lord Jesus – make these words your Word, that our hearts may become your heart. Amen.

Is Jesus supposed to get angry? At our Lenten retreat yesterday, we compared the Jesus of the gospels with the Jesus of the church and of Western culture. We have this notion of Jesus as meek and mild, but as we read the gospels, we see that Jesus is often fierce – impatient with his disciples, sarcastic with the temple leaders, hurling invective – “You brood of vipers.” But this is the only place we see him flinging tables around.

Jesus is so angry at what’s happening at the center of his community’s religious life, he doesn’t care who he ticks off. He tosses people’s money around and set free sacrificial animals like an early version of an animal rights raid. Only Jesus had a lot on his mind more than animal rights. He had human rights, and God’s rights on his mind and heart. He was about revealing the heart of God. This whole sacrificial system in the temple had gotten far, far away from God’s heart. It had become a marketplace, and worse, a killing ground where an obscene number of animals were slaughtered every day just so people would feel that God’s anger had been appeased. When you focus on rules, on reward and punishment, that’s where you end up.

The commandments were meant to be a “how-to” guide for loving God and God’s people. But they had no power to effect what they commanded. And people fell short. So they made the system more complicated, with more rules, and more laws. And when that didn’t work, they figured out a system of sacrifice to make up for their failure to keep God’s law. The penalty of failing God’s holiness is death. So they could pay to have animals killed instead of dying themselves. That’s what Jesus was reacting to in that temple, this distortion of the Law. Jesus was angry but it was a righteous anger.

He was not indulging himself – he was taking a huge risk to right this wrong.

Jesus had been preaching and teaching and demonstrating the Realm of God – that realm in which sin can be forgiven and wiped out; corruption overcome with justice; sickness overwhelmed with love.

Elsewhere he shows the values of God's Kingdom by healing;
here he demonstrates the values of God's Kingdom by attacking corruption.
Here he purifies the temple. On the cross, he purifies all of humanity,
putting to death the whole bloody system of sacrifice, of death,
as a way of dealing with sin and humanity's separation from God. He set us free.

We don't have to live in fear of God's judgment, because it's already come.
Jesus took it. Full blast. Not only the physical death – but also the separation from
God which is the consequence of human sinfulness. That's what he took for us.
And now it's done. Game over. We're on the other side of judgment.
Oh, there is still a judgment day to come, but the claim,
the hope of the Christ follower is that we stand behind Christ on that day,
with his holiness between us and judgment.

So Jesus demonstrated that anger is not incompatible with the life of faith.
But there is destructive anger and there is constructive anger.
When I was in my early twenties in New York City, I was somewhat depressed.
So I started therapy. I always thought I was a person who really had no anger.
What I learned was that depression comes from anger turned inward.
It wasn't that I wasn't angry. It was that I really didn't feel my feelings much at all.
As I started to surface feelings and pent-up anger, whoa, there was a lot of it.
It was physically uncomfortable just feeling this free-floating anger all the time.
I remember walking home from the subway one night after therapy,
feeling this yucky anger, and I prayed, "Lord, please take this anger from me
and give it back to me as something I can use."
I got home, and my roommate was there with a friend. The friend's apartment
had been burned out and she'd lost just about everything. I started to put
together some bags of clothes and housewares and stuff for her –
and later I realized: "Where's that anger? Oh – I think God answered my prayer.
Jesus gave me somewhere constructive to put my anger.

When we're calling out injustice, we're entitled to be angry,
even to knock around the furniture and set some animals free.
Our rage might be righteous, but it has to be channeled into something
constructive and productive. Free-floating rage is always corrosive.
Jesus was working for freedom. God's movement is always toward freedom.
So if our anger is not leading to freedom, we need to take a good look at it.

But anger to level the playing field? To ensure everyone has equal access to resources, equal treatment by the law? That can be used by God.

Let's get to know our righteous anger and let it fuel God's mission.

Where does injustice hook you so that you feel your blood pressure rising?

Or your tears beginning to flow? Is this God's justice or a just personal anger?

If we're acting on behalf of those who are vulnerable, being oppressed or exploited, we can be sure, based on Scripture, that this is what God means by justice.

Justice – as opposed to vengeance – is always God's work.

When we engage in God's justice, we have a chance to meet Jesus in a new way.

Don't try to do it without Jesus – you'll just end up exhausted.

Let the power of Jesus direct the work. God is already engaged in bringing about justice – we just need to ask the Holy Spirit to fill us and join him.

Whether it's seeking economic justice, racial justice, environmental justice, a cease-fire in Gaza, an end to war in the Ukraine, an end to human trafficking, better treatment for refugees and the incarcerated – whatever it is for you, ask the Holy Spirit to fill you and direct you to where you can make a difference.

For the next 10 minutes or so, we're going to take some action.

We're going to get up out of our pews and either -

- ◆ write a letter to your legislator;
- ◆ design a bumper sticker or social media post – like this (slide)
- ◆ announce a prayer circle to pray about a particular issue.

Let's have a little holy frenzy in here today!

After:

Sometimes we're called to march and speak out,
sometimes to stay home and pray.

Always we are called to invite Jesus the Justice-Maker to work through us,
setting the captives free, setting us free. *Amen.*

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.