

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

March 3, 2024 (3rd Sunday in Lent, Year B)
John 2:13-22

Show picture "What would Jesus do – cleanse the temple"

It says, "If anyone ever asks you, 'What would Jesus do?' remind that flipping over tables and chasing people with a whip is within the realm of possibilities."

Paul Harvey once told about a robber in Oceanside, California, wearing a motorcycle helmet, who walked into a bank concealing a gun. He selected a teller who appeared fiftyish, soft, kindly, an easy mark. He handed her a note demanding money or her life. The woman reached for the cash drawer. Then she looked again at the note and her eyes flashed, her lips clenched. She pulled the entire cash drawer out, but instead of giving him the money, she clobbered the robber over the head with the drawer. And again, and again. She was scolding him. Money was flying everywhere, and she continued beating him, and reprimanding him, and bouncing blows off his helmet until the young man turned and ran. Police caught him a short time later cowering in nearby shrubbery. Then they asked the bank teller WHY she was ABOUT to give him money at gunpoint, and then, SUDDENLY, became ENRAGED INSTEAD. Guess what she said. She said, "In his note there was a VERY NAUGHTY WORD."

Different PEOPLE get upset at different THINGS. Unfortunately, MOST of the time they're the WRONG things. Like OTHER people's SINS, or WHO someone else LOVES, or the subject matter of a BOOK someone ELSE wants to READ.

Will Rogers said: "People who fly into a RAGE ALWAYS have a BAD LANDING." Martin Marty once said that you can divide religious people into TWO GROUPS. Not the liberal and conservative, not the Catholics and the Protestants, but the MEAN and the NON-MEAN. A quote I once heard says: "Remember, the END never really JUSTIFIES the MEANNESS."

You see, it's not that you SHOULDN'T GET angry; it's what you get angry ABOUT, and what you DO with your anger.

Jesus got angry too. But let's be honest, this SCENE of the cleansing of the Temple makes us a little UNCOMFORTABLE. We are not ACCUSTOMED to JESUS BEING ANGRY. It's a STARK CONTRAST to the meek and mild picture of Jesus projected onto our religious memory since childhood. We would LIKE to think that Jesus was always kind and loving to EVERYONE he encountered, and at the very LEAST, in CONTROL. We would LIKE to think that Jesus never said a HARSH WORD to ANYONE. Some are even TROUBLED by this scene. Is he TOO HUMAN here? If this is a spark of TEMPER, couldn't Jesus be guilty of a SIN?

But who ever SAID that ANGER is a SIN? The BIBLE doesn't say that. Ephesians says, "BE ANGRY, but do not sin. Don't let the sun go down on your anger." There's nothing wrong with the EMOTION ITSELF. Like I said, it's not that you SHOULDN'T GET angry; it's what MAKES you get angry, and what you DO with your anger.

Even the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, once said, "ANYONE can become angry, that is EASY, but to be angry with the RIGHT PERSON, to the right DEGREE, at the right TIME, for the right PURPOSE, and in the right WAY, THIS is DIFFICULT."

It IS difficult. But anger can be a great motivating force in our lives. Sometimes that anger can move us to do something IMPORTANT, to CHANGE something that NEEDS to be CHANGED.

So we might LEARN something by paying ATTENTION to exactly WHAT MADE Jesus so ANGRY.

Jesus had been looking FORWARD to going to Jerusalem and the Temple for the Passover. People from all over the world would be there to worship. Just BEING there with the other pilgrims was EXCITING. But more importantly, this was a HOLY place – sacred ground that was ALL ABOUT

worship and prayer, repentance and forgiveness. This was SUPPOSED to be a place where people could feel CLOSER to GOD, a place to feel God's PRESENCE in their lives.

But when Jesus arrived at the Temple, he was UPSET by what he SAW. There in the Temple courtyard were people buying and selling cattle, sheep, and doves for sacrifices. Now, to be fair, the merchants who were selling the livestock thought they were providing a SERVICE for those pilgrims who'd come from great distances. They wouldn't need to TRAVEL WITH cattle or sheep for sacrifice; they were available for them to PURCHASE when they ARRIVED. Temple workers were also exchanging COINS for TEMPLE currency. Again, they thought they were doing the people a FAVOR. People couldn't use ROMAN coins to buy the birds and animals. The coins had a picture of Caesar, which to the Jew, was a graven image, so they had to exchange them for Temple shekels.

Now, in the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus accuses the merchants of CHEATING the people. He says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers." (Mt. 21:13) It's safe to say that there was surely some price gouging going on, but that's not ALL that upsets Jesus. In John's gospel, it's not the FOCUS of Jesus' anger. As far as John is concerned, it's not JUST the taking advantage of people; Jesus is upset, because the market ITSELF is disrupting the worship of the LORD.

THAT'S what made Jesus so angry. The marketplace is KEEPING PEOPLE OUT. It's SEPARATING people from God, putting an OBSTACLE in their way. They were LITERALLY putting themselves BETWEEN the worshippers and GOD. To GET to God, you had to go through THEM FIRST. And what about the POOREST ones, the ones who couldn't AFFORD ANY sacrifice at ALL, much less the INFLATED prices?

Something had to be DONE. Imagine the scene with me for moment.

Jesus slashed through the air with the whip he'd made from thick cords. It cracked hard across a table, overturning it, and spilling everything out onto the floor.

Jesus was breathing hard as he shouted, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" He was clutching the whip so tightly that he had to remind himself to relax his grip.

The once business-like order of the temple was now in chaos. Escaping doves fluttered overhead. Untethered oxen were wandering through the jumble of tables and boxes, as Jesus surveyed the aftermath of his work.

The moneychangers were still scrambling to find all the coins that were spilled when Jesus overturned their table. Other vendors were rolling up their wares and retreating.

A crowd of onlookers had quickly gathered. Someone shouted, "He must be crazy!"

"Get the rabbi," another shouted.

Jesus knew their hearts. They had little time for God. They had little CONCERN for the temple, which they had REDUCED to a public market. They had even LESS interest in the message of Jesus. There was a pall of hopelessness about the scene, but they would ALL be BACK in the morning.

Business as usual.

Jesus had good REASON to be ANGRY, but this isn't the ONLY time Jesus got mad in the gospels. (Advance slide.) He chastised Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" when he tried to put HUMAN ways AHEAD of the FATHER'S ways. Sounds a LOT LIKE this temple scene.

Jesus was also angry with the disciples when they PREVENTED the children from COMING to him. He was angry with the authorities that tried to KEEP a man with a withered hand from coming to him for healing. EVERY TIME ANYONE kept a person from COMING to him, Jesus would NOT TOLERATE it.

And SOMEHOW, some CHURCHES are KNOWN for the people they KEEP OUT. My guess is THAT makes Jesus VERY ANGRY. He threw the money changers out of the Temple because they were HINDERING TRUE WORSHIP, keeping people AWAY from God. Jesus came into the temple not to be destructive or disruptive, but to draw us BACK to the HEART of God. Jesus came to overturn every BARRIER that SEPARATES us from God.

This is true on many levels – peace between nations, justice for the oppressed, healing for the sick, true unfettered worship for ALL who seek the Lord. ANY of those could be a sermon all their own. But this is the season of LENT, so I'd like to suggest one MORE way this is true.

Every year, LENT CHARGES into our LIVES, overturning OUR tables. Lent challenges us to think about the way we LIVE, our integrity, and our relationship with GOD. Lent asks to examine our priorities, our positions, and our shortcomings. And LIKE Jesus at the Temple, when we LOOK at our lives, we may not LIKE what we SEE. We may be UPSET by what we FIND. We might find OBSTACLES that KEEP us from God, that keep us from LIVING our faith to the FULLEST.

You see, it's not that you SHOULDN'T GET angry; it's what you get angry ABOUT. God GAVE us anger as a NATURAL HUMAN EMOTION, because it can MOVE us to do something IMPORTANT, to CHANGE something that NEEDS to be CHANGED.

And that THING that needs to CHANGE ISN'T a NAUGHTY word, or someone ELSE'S SIN; it's YOU. Whatever it IS that's KEEPING you from God, that's HOLDING BACK your faith, it needs to GO.

Jesus asks us, "What is this DOING here? WHY is this in your life? Get it out of here! It's BLOCKING your way to ME."

And then he hands US his WHIP ... so that WE can drive out our OWN OBSTACLES.

Lent says, "Something needs to be done. It's time. NOW is the time to cleanse the temple ... the temple of your HEART. Amen.