

LENT 3, YEAR B, MARCH 3, 2024

To a first-century Jew, all their sentiment and value was centered on one building, the Temple. Whether they lived close to it or far away the Temple was the magnet that drew them to its splendor and place of holiness.

The Temple Jesus entered was built by Herod “the Great” in an attempt to curry favor with his subjects. It stood on the site of Solomon’s great building, destroyed centuries before when the Jews were conquered and enslaved. Its restoration symbolized not only religious revival, but the continuity of the nation itself.

In the gospel today, John paints a picture of an angry Jesus, entering the symbol of Israel’s security, whip in hand, driving out those who had turned the Temple into the center of a money-making racket. As you know, the Temple was the only place of sacrifice for the Jews. Sacrifice was offering back to God that which God created, whether in the form of wheat or grapes, doves or lambs, depending on the purpose of the sacrifice. Most of the time sacrifice was an offering of life on behalf of individuals and families.

The racket Jesus encountered was rather clever. For instance, a family brought its sacrifice to the Temple. It had to be inspected to make sure that it was of high enough quality to be acceptable. If the object was rejected, there were substitutes available at a price. When the head of the family offered payment, his money was rejected because it was the usual Roman coinage and was considered impure. So, guess what? These coins had to be exchanged for pure Temple currency, at a price.

Anyone who has traveled abroad knows you have to pay an exchange rate for a foreign currency. So something meant to be holy, special, unique, had been turned into a crooked commercial transaction. Jesus was furious. There’s no “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” in the gospel today. Jesus, whip in hand drives out these crooked merchants, many of whom were priests.

John tells us that chaos ensued, with Jesus overturning tables and driving animals out with a whip made of cords. People, including the disciples, were stunned and confused. But it was not simply the presence of the moneychangers and the animals offered for sale that so angered Jesus. It was the misuse of authority in the blatant and gross overcharging of even the poorest people that set him off. Whenever religion gets into the business of the “buying and selling” of God, or of requiring sacrifices to earn God’s love, we have a problem. Jesus knows this is not taking care of the poor; in fact, it’s stealing from the poor, and making them give even the little they have to feel they are right with God. Jesus is very angry about this.

In fact, Jesus’ anger here is palpable. Most of us have been taught that anger is not good, that it is unhealthy to hold anger in and can lead to health problems. We also are quite aware of what happens when someone explodes with anger in a public way. Too often we have turned on the news to hear of the latest shooting rampage that has resulted from someone’s rage. But there can be a positive side to anger. It is right to be angry at injustice. This is one of the lessons to be learned from this reading, and that is the need for righteous anger in the face of injustice, extortion, and especially, the exploitation of vulnerable people.

Anger at such things is not a bad thing. To do nothing is worse because it results in apathy towards injustice. This kind of righteous anger is a good, cleansing thing and

is not the opposite of love. Anger at injustice is an appropriate expression of love -- it is a cry for righteousness.

Righteous anger is not a loss of control. Jesus is not out of control in this reading -- he's very clear about the targets of his wrath. Righteous anger is a taking of control, a move out of passive acceptance and toward change.

St. Augustine of Hippo said, "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are Anger and Courage: Anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are."

The key to righteous anger, then, is how we work at it in the context of a loving, justice-seeking community. As Jesus knew, anger for anger's sake is worthless. Our anger, if it is righteous and motivates us for justice and compassion, is a valuable expression of our hope for a new, whole, and healed generation of God's faithful people.

Some examples of righteous anger? Martin Luther King, Jr. was angry at racial discrimination. Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu were angry at apartheid in South Africa. Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was angry about the brutality of the regime who violated basic human rights and was assassinated. These are all examples of righteous anger. There is always a time and a place for righteous anger.

Jesus' role was to inaugurate a new era, away from the old practices of exploitation and oppression by political and religious leaders and those who were only concerned about their own well being. Jesus was trying to "open up" the temple by making room for those who were on the outside. As far as Jesus was concerned God was present in a new way and he intended this new way to be inclusive, open to all. He had compassion for those who were being exploited and disdain for those who made the house of God a "den of robbers."

They were being called to be a more caring community. The act of cleansing the temple was an act of throwing out the things that blocked compassionate connection between people. All people were to be treated with respect and not to be controlled like pawns on a chessboard used by others who thought themselves more important to build a greater and more elaborate sacrificial system as a defense against what they perceived to be an angry God. Jesus is redefining the temple. He identifies his body as the temple. The new temple is the human person and we are the body of Christ.

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A question for us today is whether we are willing to take the same risks that Jesus took to seek not only individual change, but also institutional change. This shift is both vital and risky. As someone once said, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food and what we can do about it, they call me all sorts of names."

I know there are things in each of your lives that makes you angry at many forms of injustice. There are so many examples of injustice that we can't count them. Some simple examples are when we see bullying in all its ugly forms that pervades the internet, when there is domestic violence, racial profiling. The list goes on and on. We get angry inside when we see evil and injustice being done to someone.

It is now the third Sunday in Lent. I invite you to use Lent, not to deny and suppress your indignation over wrongs, but to face it and use it pro-actively. I invite you to take the initiative and focus your anger in practical ways, no matter how small. You and I might only be able to strike what seems a minuscule blow against injustices but it is worth it. It is from the pool of those who are faithful in the little things that we can begin to fight the larger injustices.

As we come forward to receive Eucharist today let us remember that this is the Table of mutual respect and right relationship. It is the Table of reconciliation and justice. It is the Table of death-defeating love. It is the Table of amazing grace and unfathomable forgiveness. Because of the love of God for us, we can bring it all to this table; Our hope, our despair, our anger, our pain-even our rage. For Jesus brought everything to the table, too; His frustration, fear, love, compassion, anger, and sorrow. And God invites us to do as much.

For you see being a Christian calls us to act sometimes in anger in order that the greatest commandment is kept - You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul - and the second is like unto it - You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.