

“Righteous Anger” a Lenten sermon by Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey
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TEXT: 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 market-place!’ 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.

Anger is not our finest emotion. As far back as medieval Christianity it was labeled a deadly sin. As unfulfilled desire, or frustrated intent, anger separates from love. It tempts by its power and it narrows perspective by its laser focus. Yet, here is Jesus our Christ, our rabbi, our Savior, getting angry.

No gentle shepherd here, shouldering a lost lamb; no quiet healer, cleansing a leper or touching a bent-over woman; no playful teacher sitting with children. Our Prince of Peace is angry, really angry! And it’s not the first time. The Evangelist Mark once remarked: “He looked around at them with anger.” (Mark 3:5). Jesus fumed at the disciples time and again for not getting it. There was nothing gentle in that fierce message he sent Herod, “Go and tell that fox...” Nor was there any trace of mildness when, as we heard last week, he turned to Peter, who only meant kindness, and snapped “Get thee behind me Satan.” He pronounced woe upon the Pharisees for their corruption of the faith. Other denunciations he hurled at the Pharisees included “you hypocrites” (Mark 23:13) “you whitewashed tombs” (Matt. 23:27) “you serpents” (Matt 23:33) “you make your convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.” (Matt 23:15)

Those who knew him best remembered that his eyes could flame as fire; the Book of Revelations coined that strange phrase, “the wrath of the Lamb” (Rev. 6:16) to describe something fearsome within Jesus.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we are used to God’s anger. There is an element of accountability and judgment, an impatient, even furious, edge to God’s frustration. But in the New Testament, we gloss over Jesus’ anger. We remember the admonitions to turn the other cheek and to forgive 70 X 7. We hear the reassuring compassion in “my peace I give you” and “be at peace with one another.” We embrace Jesus as ever loving and forgiving, and end up uncomfortable, even shocked, at displays of genuine anger.

How might the two be reconciled? Since forgiveness is the most unique and abiding core of Christianity-- both the ability to receive and to offer forgiveness--might anger actually inform forgiveness?

Writer Robert Enright thinks so. In his book *Forgiveness is a Choice*, he posits that uncovering our anger is the first step toward forgiveness. The resentments we harbor can become instructive rather than destructive; they can focus our attention and help identify the provocation, so that we can then move through it, beyond it. Then anger becomes a tool rather than a weapon. I think the church has failed most profoundly in teaching us about that first step. I think that the church has taught, especially to women, elaborate and sanctified ways to cover, mask, and bury our anger, denying us access to the power of transformation and forgiveness.

Uncovering our anger means dealing headlong with the ways we hide it. These might include denial, (“it wasn’t so bad”) suppression (“I can’t think about that right now”) displacement (“I can’t be mad at him so I’ll be mad at you instead – or at myself”) regression (“I am going to rip this telephone off the wall and throw a salad bowl”-- like a two-year-old with a tantrum) or identification (“I won’t be hurt like that again, so I’ll just act like she did”).

Anything sound familiar? It does to me. If I am honest I don’t want to look directly at my anger because I am ashamed. The anger is often at me – I am stupid, I let someone take advantage, I feel guilty, I have a bruised ego, I am embarrassed by my own naivety... It is easier to be angry “out there” than to look at my own actions, how I might have been wrong or culpable or complicit.

But when I turn a clear-eyed gaze on my own anger and dismantle it, step by step, into its component parts, I gain access to a fresh new spiritual energy. A renewed healthy humility allows me to ask forgiveness from those I’ve injured, gives me spiritual flexibility, to let go of minor slights, and enables me to cease feeling resentment toward an offender.

Then I am left with a clean pure flame of righteous anger that is the fuel for creative passionate change. This, I think, is the quality of anger we see in Jesus.

Let’s look at the story.

Jesus joins pilgrims already gathering for Passover. He enters through the elaborate, dazzling main gate and climbs up into the great Court of the Gentiles – the center reserved for those who were non Jews, but who were nonetheless believers in the One God. It must have been a lovely moment for Jesus. The temple had always symbolized the presence of the most holy God, Yahweh. It was the center of Jewish life; it helped to define what it meant to be a Jew. Many of the psalms were composed to celebrate walking up those steps to the Temple and Jesus may well have been singing one as he approached. Even as Jesus, with his very life, was separating himself from the Temple culture, he still approached with awe and reverence.

The turnout of soldiers was not new. In an occupied city, the Roman presence was obvious - you could see soldiers standing in the windows of their constabulary, walking

the porticos, looking over the temple, watching everything. And at festival times, the numbers increased.

What was new was the mass of moneychangers and merchants spreading over the acres of courtyard. Oh Jesus knew there was marketplace activity during the high holy feast days. Increasingly, peasants had become tenants rather than landowners, so most could not provide their own animals for sacrifice. Most people -- especially pilgrims from afar -- purchased the pigeon or ox or that perfect sacrificial lamb. And since the coin of the realm was Roman, inscribed with the profile of Caesar, and the words "Julius Caesar - Son of God," such coins could not be used in the temple; they had to be exchanged for the Jewish shekel. Thus the moneychangers, too, cheaters though they might be, also had their purposes.

But this day Jesus found the frenzied carnival of moneychangers and sellers within the temple itself! According to John 6, Jesus had not been to Jerusalem since the Feast of Tabernacles some six months earlier. Since then, High Priest Caiaphas had ordered the merchants and moneychangers to be moved from the Mount of Olives down into the Court of the Gentiles. Not only were the Gentile worshippers crowded out, the commerce trade pushed up against the walls of the high temple itself. This beautiful thin place on earth where God felt close as breathing and forgiveness flowed like a fountain, this sacred space for people to become exuberant in worship or passionate in confession, this holy place, had become defiled.

He must have stood there in the courtyard, looking at all the stalls, where animals and birds were being sold, watched the haggling over price, listened to the clinking sound of money dropped into purses. Jesus reached for a bundle of cords used to tie the animals for sacrifice, braided them together, and cleansed the Temple to (in John Calvin's words) "restore the purity of the worship of God... to renew and defend the holiness of the temple."

He strode around the courtyard of the temple, his face red and eyes wild, his strong arms slashing right and left, systematically turning over the tables, throwing the money around, letting the animals and the birds loose. "How dare you turn my Father's House into a market!" he bellowed.

The disciples were shaken by what they witnessed. However, they "remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' " They recalled Psalm 69 which they saw Jesus fulfill.

In John, Jesus is already distancing himself from the Jewish temple culture. From the beginning of John, Jesus is presented as questioning and replacing the Jewish institutions of his day. Even the opening phrase "The Passover of the Jews is near" shows Jesus standing with one foot outside that religious world. For John, his whole Gospel is predicated on Jesus becoming the new Temple, the bread of life which surpasses manna and is the mediator with God. Here we see Jesus focusing his anger on a watered-down religion of legalities and sacrificial technicalities rather than the embrace of a God of

Love. His anger points toward the day in which the temple's significance becomes eclipsed by one whose death is vindicated through God's resurrection. This story in John is not about the sacrificial system itself; it is about how heartfelt religious practices in one generation have become ossified in the next. The sacrifices -- and the Temple commerce in them, which after all was there for the benefit of the worshippers -- had become, not evil, but an end in itself. Thus Jesus comes to re-center our worship, to offer himself as our center.

A robust faith, be it at the individual level or in a congregation's public witness, requires saying a clear and forthright NO to some things, even as it says YES to God and to God's reign. If it is unhealthy, self serving, vindictive anger, it will result in impulsive and regrettable actions, and it will deny you any access to your most vulnerable and most powerful instincts. It will block productive action and will destroy any chance of forgiveness – that is, letting go of the resentment and moving toward resolution. Unexpressed, unresolved, misdirected anger will lead to a violation of self and others. It will accomplish nothing.

But if it is healthy anger – an anger you address and consider, an anger against injustice for the sake of another's freedom or safety – then you can channel the energy of resentment into constructive, effective, direct action to remediate the injustice and free yourself from a prison of hostility and bitterness. Uncovering anger energizes us to a passion for justice and action.

This is the Jesus anger – a choice to feel it, and consider it. Then a choice to direct it and move through it. Like everything else in the arsenal of human potential, anger is a tool we can use to the advantage of the world. But if we stay there, if we don't consider where to direct it, anger keeps us from being our whole selves.

Jesus exhibits anger that is not personal. He joked with Pharisees immediately after lambasting them. Peter was still his best friend, even when Jesus is angry at him. Jesus anger is systemic -- caused by dysfunctional systems.

Jesus gives us permission to be angry. What he does not give permission for is to stay in that anger.

Forgiveness is a way out of pain, a lifting of the heavy weight of resentment and injustice. Anger can be its own wilderness – but it can also point the way out of the wilderness. It can replace powerlessness with empowerment, enabling us to open ourselves to God's good love and healing, to walk in genuine forgiveness in this world, and to channel our energies to align with God's passion for justice.

May it be so.