


Scott L. Thompson
First Presbyterian Church, Willmar, MN
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"Turning the Tables"
John 2: 13-25

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?'¹⁹ Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'²⁰ The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?'²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body.²² 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.

23 When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.²⁴ But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people²⁵ and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

OK, think of your pet peeve. That thing that always drives you nuts! A friend posted an online list of pet peeves people had messaged him. Here's a few that you may or may not relate to: tailgaters, slow drivers in the left lane, people tossing their cigarette butts out of their car windows, abandoned grocery carts in the parking lot, misplaced apostrophes, mixing up their and there, your and you're, people chewing ice, people talking on their cell phones in public places, and the list goes on.



These things can make us angry right? I mean, sometimes really, irrationally angry, from zero to 60 in seconds angry. They provoke that emotion that we wish we'd never experience. Indeed, we try to hide our anger, suppress our anger, or deny our anger. We're Minnesota Nice, so it wouldn't do to display our anger, so we pretend we don't feel it. But we do, and so it usually simmers and erupts in some unhealthy passive aggressive way later that day - typically on an unsuspecting spouse, or kid, or coworker, who had nothing to do with the anger in the first place.

So it maybe makes us a bit uncomfortable to see in today's text an angry Jesus. This is Jesus in a rage. He makes a whip of cords and lashes the animals into a frenzy to get them to bolt from the temple courtyard. He dumps cashboxes of coins out onto the ground. He flips tables.

This is the same Jesus who we're accustomed to thinking of as calm, cool, and collected. This is the same Jesus we picture serenely walking across the stormy waves and stilling the seas. This is the same Jesus who we remember stoically fielding Pontius Pilate's questions and debating with the scribes and Pharisees without breaking a sweat. This is the same Jesus who we picture stepping into the heart of tragedy and grief in order to heal lepers, blind men, and the lame.

Angry Jesus makes us uncomfortable. We don't get this angry Jesus. But we *need to get* this angry Jesus, we need to comprehend who he is, and we need to grasp the source of his anger. Because this is part of the unveiling truth of what it means to have God with us in the flesh. This is what it means to have the word becoming flesh and living among us. We need to get this Jesus in order to understand the divine.

Earlier I was talking about pet peeves, and annoyances, and their ability to make us upset. I don't want to confuse what Jesus' anger was, with those minor annoyances. Those pet peeves are simply the product of our personal wills being thwarted. They represent our inner child not getting its way. A pet peeve is no more than an annoyance. What Jesus was about was what we could best describe as *righteous anger*.

Why was it, exactly, that Jesus was expressing this righteous anger? A bit of explanation is in order to help us understand. A few points: First of all, the animals and sellers were performing a valuable service to the temple worshippers. It wasn't their presence there per se that caused the problem. Faithful Jews were taught in the Torah to make period trips to the Temple in Jerusalem to make sacrifices to God. For instance, when Jesus, a first born male child, came into the world, Joseph and Mary were to go to Jerusalem and offer a lamb sacrifice to God. Being a poor family from the sticks, they would not have been able to afford a lamb, so would have substituted a pair of doves instead (this is all recorded in Luke 2: 22-24). By having a livestock for sale in the temple courtyard, the sellers enabled travelers to dispense with the trouble of carting animals from the country into Jerusalem. Instead, the problem had to do with the money. Isn't it always about the money?

History tells us that business that could be conducted in the temple could only be done in a specific Jewish currency, the shekel. Offerings could only be made in shekels, and animals purchased in shekels. The problem is that the coins of the land would have been Roman mint, and most certainly not Jewish shekels. So, a pilgrim to the Jewish temple would need to make a currency exchange before buying an animal. And what we gather from this text and the other Gospels is that they were taking advantage of their captive audience, who had trudged scores or hundreds of miles from the country to make a sacrifice. These pilgrims often would have been the poorest of Israel's poor: shepherds, farmers, and tradesmen – some making a once in a lifetime trip to the temple. It's a fine line between the law of supply and demand, and between taking advantage of a vulnerable population.

So, the people were being exploited by these money changers. Not only that, but it is as Jesus says, this is his Father's house. Imagine if you came home to your living room to find it filled with a Payday lending operation. You'd be a little upset. As a result, zeal for the Lord overcomes Jesus (v. 17), and he cleans his house. Both literally and figuratively. Jesus is overcome with *righteous anger*.

This is the positive side of anger that we overlook. Anger is a connection to a deeply held conviction in our heart. When this deep conviction is violated, anger can open a pathway into an energy, which when properly channeled, brings about

purposeful change. Anger rouses us to action. Anger reinforces the righteousness of our cause. Anger can enlist others to join us in righting wrongs.

We see an example of just what this righteous, purposeful, and dare I say, holy, anger can do in today's text. But there is a fine line between righteous anger, and self-righteous anger. And so we need to tread carefully here, lest we confuse the two.

As I stated earlier, is it normal and customary that we will experience anger. Especially when something happens that goes against our deeply held convictions and beliefs. These circumstances can violate our sense of justice or morality. But when we find ourselves in those situations we need to tread lightly, because the line between righteous anger and self-righteous anger is a fine one.

When anger flares, we need to remember our brokenness. We need to recall all the times when we've been wrong. We need to maintain our humility as a check to our anger. We have to be wary of our own pride. It's all too easy to confuse our own self-righteous crusades with a holy cause. History is full of such instances when people have confused their own self-righteous crusades with the work of the kingdom. A lot of harm can be done. It's been said that when God is angry at all the same things we are, we've created a god in our own image. An idol. We need to reject these idols.

So, how do we identify righteous anger? How do we keep our hubris from leading us astray? The answer to that is always going to be Jesus. What do his life and teachings tell us? What things were close to Jesus' heart? Where did Jesus spend his time and energy? What things did Jesus teach and preach thematically over and over again? You know these themes don't you? They sound familiar: Love of God and neighbor, treating each human being as you'd want to be treated yourself, a deep concern for those that are hurting, marginalized, poor, or disadvantaged, doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God.

The Bible describes our faith journeys as becoming more and more like Jesus as we grow. As we become more like Christ, we'll find ourselves becoming more and more like him. We'll be loving the people and things he loves. We'll also be angered by the same things he is. As we progress down this path, we need to check ourselves. Does our anger correspond with the teachings of Jesus? Do we

find a deep sense of passion and injustice when we see the values and teachings of Jesus violated? In Jesus day, the poor were being exploited in the temple courtyard. But that sort of injustice hasn't ended. It is still going on today. If we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear, we may notice it going on all around us. And it may cause us to tap into a source of righteous anger. And that righteous anger may spur us to take action for the sake of the Gospel.

Before you feel the pressure of the weight of all of this on your shoulders alone, know that we are together in this. The beautiful thing about our life as Presbyterians is that we affirm that God works through. The whole structure of our church is built around shared discernment and decision making. We seek God together. We pray together. We act together. This is a logical check to our pride and our own self-righteousness. Not only that, we have a savior who is our teacher and our guide in all of this. When we trust in him, and in his spirit working in our community, we will find our way.

When we work together to discern how God is moving in our midst, it's possible that we will discover a great passion springing from a righteous anger that intersects with the gospel. When this passion is stirred, the people of God can do mighty things. May you search for your great passion in life. May you find it's connection to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. May you use this passion for the work of the Kingdom of God. May it enliven you to work tirelessly for love of God and neighbor. And may you be blessed.

Alleluia and Amen.