

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

As we read the gospels, we see that Jesus is often ticked off – impatient with his disciples, Last week we saw him rebuke Peter, calling him “Satan.”

He is sarcastic with the temple leaders, hurling invective –

“You whitewashed tombs,” “You brood of vipers.”

But this is the only place we see him hurling tables.

There are two accounts in the Gospels of Jesus tossing around tables – either it happened more than once, or, more likely, the writer of John’s gospel heard the story, wasn’t sure when it occurred and put it into his narrative where he thought it fit best.

Other gospels place this story near the end of Jesus’ ministry, one of the last straws sealing Jesus’ fate, here it happens near the start, setting a pattern of antagonism between Jesus and religious authorities that only intensifies.

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.

But toss 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 rules, the Law, starting with those commandments we read today, 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, setting animals free.
And on the cross, he takes an action that sets all of us free.
He was 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.

Why free? Because, my friends, the cross means that we are off the hook.

That it's not about "being a good person" –

because most of us aren't really very good all the time, are we?

One of my least favorite expressions in the whole world is "a good Christian."

Because it SOOOO misses the point! It's not about being a good but faithful.

It's about believing that Christ has already done that for you.

It's about being a real person, a loved person, a freed person,
leaning into God in faith, not living on our own strength.

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.
"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He took that.
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.

We all know that there is destructive anger and constructive anger.

When I was in my early twenties in New York City, I was somewhat depressed,
as are many at that age.

And 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. And I remember walking home from the subway one night after therapy, feeling this 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, might even have given her some money – and it wasn't till later that I realized: "Where's that anger. Oh – I think God was answering that prayer." Jesus gave me somewhere constructive to put my anger.

The rage might be righteous, but it has to be channeled into something constructive and productive. Free-floating rage is always corrosive.

Jesus was naming a wrong. When we're calling out injustice, we're entitled to be angry, even to knock around the furniture and set some animals free.

We are never entitled to hurt another person, or entrap them.

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 set God's creatures free? That can be used by God.

And what do we with our not-so-righteous anger?

We can do what I did that day – pray, "Lord, take this anger and give it back to me as something I can use. This long-term anger at my spouse, my mother or father; this seething resentment of my boss."

Justified, yes. Holy? No.

And when we're angry with someone, ask if it's appropriate to tell them –

Not in a blaming way, but in a "I get angry when..." way.

If that is not going to be constructive, tell God, and ask God to bless that person.

And our righteous anger? Let's get to know it 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.

We're talking this Lent about how to become more effective peace-makers.

Intentional peace-making is a wonderfully constructive way to channel anger.
I was hooked by the reference to Jesus overturning tables in the temple –
And couldn't help but think of the reference in Psalm 23 to
God setting tables for us in the presences of our enemies.
Are we willing to sit down with people who make us mad? Who make us sad?
Are we willing to bring a holy hospitality to encounters across difference?

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

Always we are called to invite the Spirit of God to work through us,
Setting the captives free, setting ourselves 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.