

Love's Anger

If you've been with us in worship since September, you know that we are exploring a theme this year, the theme of "Learning and Living God's Love, Together." We are doing so motivated in part by a question—does this phrase adequately convey our church's vision for ministry? Could we adopt it for the foreseeable future?

Four subthemes have been part of this. God loves the world, love God, love others, God is love—we've looked at scriptures which help us understand these intertwined dimensions of learning and living love. But in February, as Lent approached—Lent, with its introspective quality—we began to wonder. Is this Love theme big enough to encompass the darker side of life? Where is Love in times of temptation and in times of lament? And this week—where is Love in anger? Where is the love?

So this morning I am diving into a gospel story I don't believe I've ever preached on before, Jesus in the Temple overturning the tables of the money changers. Aside from the obvious psychoanalytical question—what is it about anger that I've been trying to avoid—I hope we can discover how God's love includes, embraces, and redeems anger.

How many times have we heard—or said—"I prefer the New Testament God of Love rather than the Old Testament God of wrath." Let's begin by debunking that stereotype. Yes, the God of the Bible is described as angry, even wrathful, at times. But Biblical studies professor George Landes of Union Theological Seminary in New York City says that "proportionate to their respective lengths, there seems to be as much explicit allusion to the divine anger in the New Testament as in the Old." ("Some Biblical & Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God," *The Living Pulpit*, Oct-Dec 1993, p. 10) God is serious about human sin. God sympathizes with the victims of human cruelty. And God is passionate about setting free those who are oppressed. God's anger is stirred by all of these, and these truths about God are throughout the entire Bible. God's wrath is aimed at transforming and renewing human beings. God is not dispassionate, God cares, and God's anger is inseparable from God's holiness and justice.

So where is the love when Jesus goes to the Jerusalem Temple and creates a scene? The Temple was the holiest place known to Jews of his day, the dwelling place of God, where humans could come close to God and offer sacrifices, according to the instructions of scripture and tradition?

John tells us it was Passover, so there would have been crowds of pilgrims from all over the Mediterranean world in Jerusalem at the time. They came to perform their religious duty. It was far easier to purchase a bird or animal in Jerusalem than to keep the bird or animal in perfect condition on a long journey. So merchants provided these pilgrims a service by selling what was needed right there, in the outer court of the Temple. And travelers from afar would have come with the currency of their countries, wanting to pay their required Temple Tax. So they needed the services of money changers who, for a small fee, would provide them with the right sort of shekels. It was a matter of convenience. If we only accepted \$20 bills in the offering plate, we might consider installing an ATM in the narthex, or in the entry hall where we have an AED. (Side comment – check it out)

There may well have been graft and corruption going on in the Temple courtyard. When Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story of this event, they say that Jesus called it a "den of thieves." And at the Passover, the atmosphere may have felt like a circus. With all the animals, the noise probably exceeded this sanctuary on the Sunday when we hold the Blessing of the Animals. But I think that what made Jesus most angry was deeper than these things. I think he was claiming the mantle of the

prophets, who railed against empty ritual masquerading as piety. “I hate, I despise your festivals,” spoke Amos on behalf of God, “and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream!” (Amos 5:21-24, abridged)

Or the prophet Micah, asking in a courtroom drama, “With what shall I come before the Lord, shall I come with burnt offerings, with calves and rams, and 10,000 rivers of oils? God has shown you what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God?” (Micah 6:6-8, abridged)

Or Jeremiah, whose anger was mixed with sorrow, “For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones.” (Jeremiah 20:8-9)

I think Jesus had fire in his bones, the fire of passion for God’s ways and passion for God’s wayward people. The same Jesus who gently welcomed children, who looked with compassion on the sick and suffering, who taught, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth,” had a fiery passion for justice and righteousness. Exploding onto the scene at the heart of Jewish religious life, he was announcing the day of the Lord, the arrival of God’s judgment. And as the prophet Malachi spoke, “Who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appears?” (Malachi 3:2)

So Jesus made a whip to drive the cattle and sheep from the Temple courtyard. He broke the cages of the doves and chickens. He turned over the tables of the money changers, sending coins clattering everywhere. Anyone who tries to say this was something other than anger is rationalizing. Jesus was angry. He had fire in his bones, in his voice, and in his arms.

So what makes us think that anger is less than Christian? Certainly we know that anger can be very dangerous, like a fire out of control. It can be unjustified, and misdirected. It can be fearful. Maybe we remember the scriptural advice, “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger.” (Ephesians 4:26) Or “A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back.” (Proverbs 29:11) We have all seen and been victims of human anger turned wrong. And we have all let our anger cause us to hurt others, or hurt ourselves. Anger can turn to sin.

But if Jesus could let his anger out, if God can be angry, and if we are created in God’s image, then there must also be a positive use of anger, a holy anger. Learning from God’s anger, we can admit to ways we have gone adrift from God’s desires for us, and submit to God’s correction. Scripture tells us, God is “slow to anger” and God’s anger does not last forever. God forgives. Learning from Jesus’ anger, we can name the fire in our bones which motivates us to seek and do justice. St. Augustine said that “Hope has two lovely daughters: anger, so that what must not be cannot be; and courage, so that what can be will be.” (*The Living Pulpit*, Oct-Dec 1992, p. 28) What burns within us as something we must speak out about, or do something about? Where is our hope?

Over the course of this year, we have gathered to learn more about topics in our world which give us concern. We’ve talked about the question, “what is breaking God’s heart in our community that we might be able to do something about?” Where is God’s passion, and what are we called to be passionate about?

Is it homelessness in our community? We have Family Promise, the HRDC’s Warming Center, and numerous programs to help people on the financial margins. Yet still we have homeless people, people who don’t have basic shelter. Every year we have people who die homeless in Bozeman, their diseases exacerbated by the challenges of living outside. That makes me very sad, and it makes me angry that we accept this as “normal.”

Or are we ready to be passionate about addiction? A few weeks ago we heard an expert from the university remind us of our state's record suicide rate, about the high percentage of teenagers who are dealing with mental illness, about the rapidly growing population of children in foster care because their parents are addicted, and about the "culture of use" which is all around us. All these things are related to one another, it's impossible to say which comes first. Do we have the fire in our bones to do something more than just hope it's not going to affect our own families? That's wishful thinking, these problems already touch all of us. Instead of wringing our hands in despair, might we have enough holy anger to love the world as God does, and start to heal the world?

Or are we ready to overturn the tables of environmental injustice, to say it's time for things to change so that future generations will have a healthy planet? It will require some economic disruption, coins clanging across the floor. But all our acts of worship are meaningless if we fail to care for the poor with more than just charity. And the poor are already suffering from human disruption of the precious balance of earth's systems which have allowed human life to thrive. Just ask the people of south Louisiana, or Paradise, California, or this week, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi. Could we bring those sisters, anger and courage, together to give us all hope?

My friends, in Jesus Christ we see that the anger of God is rooted in the love which God has for us. It is holy anger, and shows us that God's love is nothing like sentimentality. God's love is fierce and passionate, and demands justice. After all, it was unholy anger which put Jesus on the cross. And it was divine Love which overcame that darkest day of all.

I close with a poem which is also a prayer, by Presbyterian minister Thomas Troeger, entitled "Holy Anger."

With holy anger, Christ,
disrupt the power that feeds upon the cruel sacrifice of others' rights and needs.
As you turned over tables and sent coins
spinning and jangling across the temple floor,
disrupt the unholy commerce in our hearts:
selling faith for security and trading justice for peace.
By that same anger start what evil can't defeat:
a stubborn passion in the heart to see God's will complete.
But do not let our rage grow bitter as the din of fierce mean minds that fail to gauge when anger turns
to sin.
Instead, let anger be the first note in love's ascending scale.
Instead, let anger be compassion's kindling fire
that lights in us the energy to live as you desire.