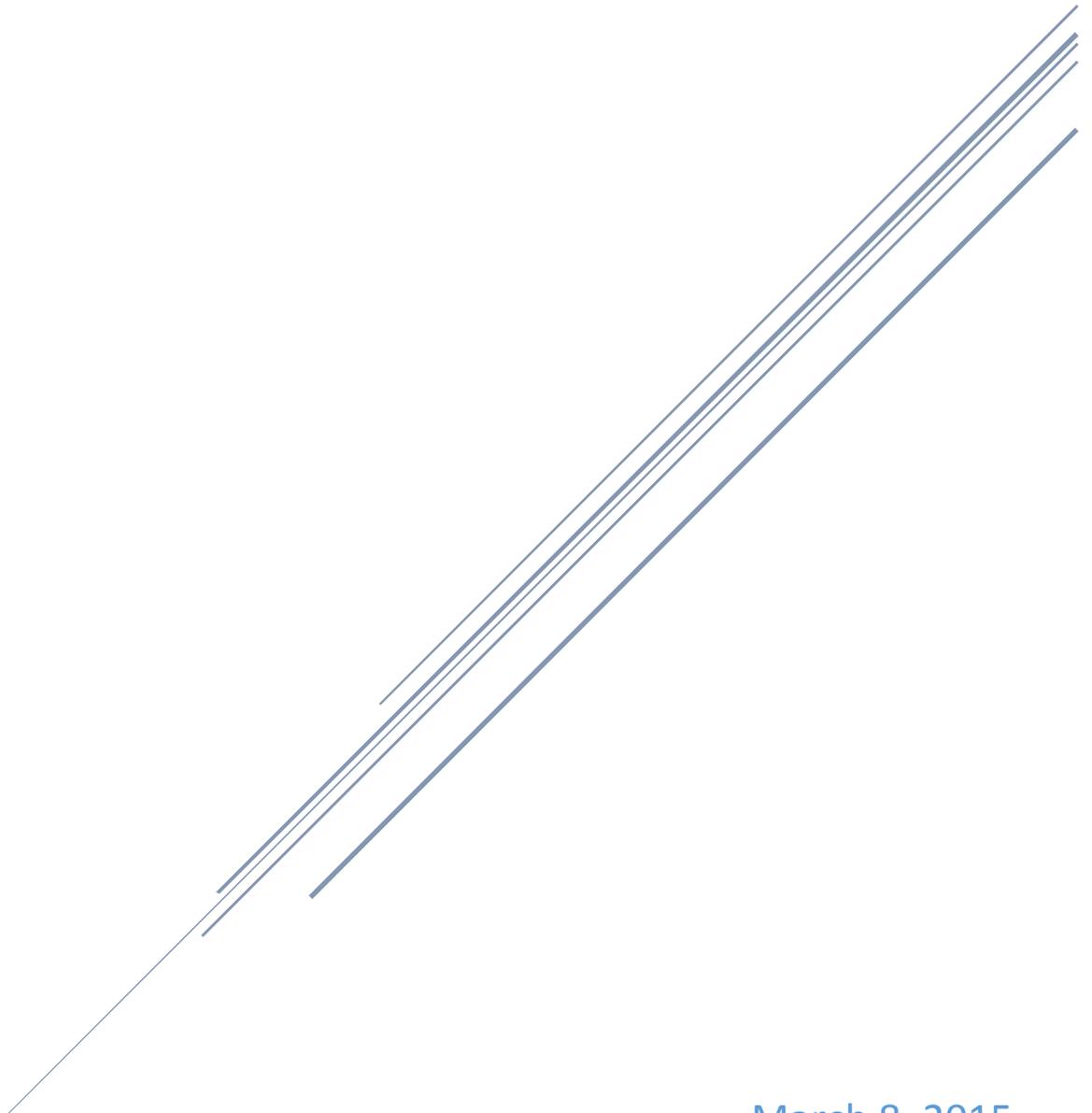


ANGRY JESUS

John 2:13-22



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“What would Jesus do?” Turn the other cheek? Go the extra mile? Heal somebody? Can you imagine Jesus getting so angry that he made his own whip and had this terrific tantrum – knocking over tables and yelling, “Get this stuff out of here!” He really seems to have lost it. Or was it ‘civil disobedience?’

Let’s back up a minute – back to the days of the Old Testament:

You know those remarkable mornings where the sun seems extra dazzling, and the sky is so blue you have to stop and marvel? When the breeze is gentle and cool, and the sun feels warm on your face... When the mountains, the trees the homes and the flowers and the birds all just seem to sing... All is well with the world for a moment and you’ve managed to slow down just enough to catch it.

I imagine it was that kind of a morning when King Solomon, in his regal bathrobe, stepped out of his cedar palace onto the sweeping veranda with his morning coffee...looking out over his kingdom, as it shone gloriously in the brilliant sunshine. The birds singing; the scent of jasmine wafting up from the gardens below; for an instant the burdens of governing seemed a little lighter.

Then it dawned on him. He had a grand house; God was in a tent. Solomon’s father King David, had said something once about building God a house and suddenly it all came flooding back to him – all was well with the world, except for one tiny little – OK – huge, ginormous thing! So Solomon decided to build God a house.

Now, we don’t often grasp the depth of this calling of King Solomon’s. We tend to think, “Oh - he wants to build a church.” You know, a house of God as opposed to a house FOR God.

Now I’m sure you’re aware that there’s no shortage of churches. The world is full of churches and chapels, monasteries and mosques, synagogues and stupas that were built because somebody thought it sounded like a good idea to build a place of worship there.

I got on google maps and I found 25 churches between Glenwood Springs, Carbondale, and Basalt, and I’m sure there are more. When I visited England I loved the fact that every little village was built around some old cathedral or chapel. We’d take the train out of the city and you could see the spires dotting the countryside. Our American landscapes are peppered with churches, too; sometimes in Gothic stone, sometimes in sleek and modern concrete and glass, and sometimes in simple white siding.

But Solomon’s temple wasn’t just another church. It wasn’t even another important church like St Peter’s in the Vatican or Westminster Abbey in London. Solomon’s temple was the only place of worship in the whole country of Israel. Not just a house of God, but God’s house. Not a house for the People-of-God, but THE house of God.

Nowadays, for most of us the church is that building where people meet to worship and hear God's word – to have rummage sales and pancake breakfasts. On Easter. At 9:00 [BCUMC, 10:00]. God is no more present here in the church than anywhere else. There are often deep ties to the building – loved ones were married or buried here. Spouses met here in youth group. Children come back from college – and after college – two times a year to attend church with their parents; but God is everywhere, right?

In Temple theology, however, there in the center of the temple – in what was known as the 'Holy of Holies' – they placed the Ark of the Covenant. And there, in the heart of the Temple complex – it was a complex – in the heart of the great city of Jerusalem which served as the spiritual and political heart of Israel – God lived right there -- in the middle of God's people.

That's important because in this passage from John, Jesus identifies himself as the Temple. So if we don't understand the importance of the temple to the people of Israel – the only place where the Almighty God dwells among the people -- then we lose the significance of what Jesus is teaching them, and us, because as you know, even when he wasn't teaching, Jesus was always teaching. Sneaky fellow....

Jesus is teaching them – and us -- that HE is the place where the Almighty God dwells among the people.

And one more thing: When John's audience was reading this it was only 40 years or so after the destruction of the Temple by Rome – in 70 AD they razed it to the ground. Jews not only in Israel and Jerusalem, but scattered around the known world, were still trying to figure out how to get along without a temple -- without the center of their faith. When they read the Gospel of John, they were comforted to learn that there was another temple; not some building made of stone and cement, but Jesus.

Imagine a similar morning that day in Jerusalem – the sun was shining, the locals and visitors were excitedly buying and selling cattle, sheep and doves, preparing for their Passover sacrifice in the temple. Other merchants were sitting at tables exchanging money, because the provincial currency was no good in the now Roman occupied city. I can almost hear it – cows and other livestock mooing and bleating, coins rattling and jingling, changing hands all around you.

Jesus had been to Jerusalem before -- countless times. He'd never had much to say, and probably participated in the rituals and festivities. Imagine the boy's excitement as Jesus' father gave him a few coins to buy a couple doves to give to the priests for the family's sacrifice.

But on this trip, on this Passover, Jesus loses it, and I could preach a whole sermon on whether anger is a sin or not – it's not by the way. Dr. Beverly Wildung Harrison, renowned scholar, and teacher of Christian social ethics & feminist theory asks us to consider that the problem is not anger itself. We know anger can be positive or negative. We know that being

angry at injustice is right, and being apathetic to injustice is not. Her challenge to Christians is to “harness the power of anger in the work of love.”

Jesus got angry, but why? We don't like thinking about angry Jesus, but one of my favorite New Testament scholars (who's on History channel sometimes), John Dominic Crossan, says that Jesus wasn't angry at the Temple, or even at the priests, so much. Crossan writes, “Jesus was angry about the Jewish religious cooperation with the Roman Imperial control.” He goes on to clarify, “Jesus way is against any capital city's collusion between...religion and imperial violence at any time and in any place.”

Think back to biology class... Remember the difference between Genus and Species? Genus is a higher level of classification and species is a sub classification, right? Well, there's a thing called a genus-species fallacy, or category mistake, which assumes that a particular aspect of a species would also be the case with every species in the genus. Jesus, you see, was not against the genus 'Judaism,' or for the genus 'Christianity.' He was against a specific species of Judaism, just as he would be against certain unjust species of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism today.

Jesus learned all about justice from the Torah – the first 5 books of our Old Testament – telling us that the land is ultimately God's and we are simply stewards of it. Psalm 24 says it: “The earth is God's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” Even while he's throwing his tantrum and tossing the the tables around, Jesus is quoting the prophet Isaiah: “...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples,” it says, and not some corrupt religious institution, oblivious to or even underwriting the plight of the poor and/or marginalized.

Listen to what God said through the prophet Amos some 700 years earlier:

²¹ I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

*²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;*

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

*²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.*

*²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Jesus actions in the temple are a reflection of those words from Amos. If God has to choose between worship and justice, which do you think God will choose? I think it's pretty clear.

The question for us today is, “Am I willing to take the same risks that Jesus took, not only toward personal, individual change, but institutional change?” Dare I? After all, as the

saying goes, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." (Dom Helder Camara, archbishop of Brazil, 1964 to 1985)

Jesus has moved from simply eating with sinners, and touching the untouchable – controversial, yet more harmless and acceptable -- to confronting the institutional system that creates and maintains the unequal and unjust socio-economic boundaries in the first place." Speaking truth to power they call it. In the words of Christian writer and political activist Jim Wallis, "You can't just keep pulling bodies from the river without sending somebody upstream to see...who's throwing them in."

Unlike the other three Gospels, John sets this episode early in Jesus ministry, but scholars are certain that John was always more interested in theology than in history, anyway. But even as the scholars agree that this incident was probably the one that precipitated Jesus' execution, they all agree that Jesus did not want to die. But he was willing to take the necessary risk to follow his passion for the Kingdom of God on earth.

Jesus had been in the temple before without incident, which shows that we never know when God will inspire someone to take the next step – maybe even me or you -- experimenting with prophetic actions of civil disobedience like Jesus' turning over tables in the temple. And it's interesting that most acts of 'civil dis-obedience' could also be seen as acts of 'Biblical obedience.'

Maybe Jesus is more concerned with systemic evil than with individual salvation. He wasn't executed until he moved against the system. John Crossan said, "Those who live by compassion are often canonized. Those who live by justice are often crucified." That's a scary thought. I'm not sure I'm willing to go that far. On the other hand, I haven't felt the need, yet. On the other hand, I DO want to imitate Christ to the best of my ability. So if Jesus can get angry, as a follower of Christ so can I -- so can you.

I saw a bumper sticker recently that said, "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention!" Maybe that's the cross of the world that we talked about last week, remember? "If any want to become my followers," Jesus said, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross..."

So During the week ahead, as you listen to the radio, or watch your favorite news program, keep today's reading in mind – and maybe last week's -- and think about this:

How is God calling you to "harness your anger in the work of love?"

What would Jesus do?

Amen.