

John 2:12-25

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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Experiencing Jesus as Disrupter

A tale of two angers.

“I’m going to put you in the game, but you can’t shoot.” I was in ninth grade, and I didn’t get along with my abusive basketball coach. I had asked my dad if I could quit the team, but his response was always, “Harrells don’t quit.” We were in a tight game, and the small gym was filled to capacity as we played a cross-town rival. I jogged out onto the court. The ball was passed to me, and I was wide open, so I took the shot. It went in and out of the rim. My coach stood up, enraged, threw his towel on the ground, and shouted at the top of his lungs, “Get off the floor!”

We lost the game.

In the post-game locker room, my coach predictably took all his unresolved inner conflicts out on our team. He was screaming, yelling, telling us how we didn’t care, didn’t try hard enough — the usual rant. The locker room door was a heavy wooden door that swung on hinges when unlocked. It suddenly flew open, and there was my dad. The room fell silent. My dad was looking for me. He made eye contact and told me, “Let’s go.” I quietly gathered my gear and walked out of the quiet room. On the way to the car, my dad said, “You can turn in your uniform on Monday.”

The first anger was rooted in control, manipulation, ego, and manifested in out of control rage. The second anger was rooted in justice, love, and impatience with the status quo of a form of oppression.

The first anger seeks to gain a reputation out of it’s expression. The second anger risks reputation in the righting of wrongs.

The first anger fueled my rage, and made me feel hopeless. The second anger made me feel seen, known, and loved, and gave me hope.

So we might say the first thing we see in this text is Holy Heat and the power of righteous anger. The image of an angry Jesus has largely receded from Christian consciousness. The Jesus who, driven by compassion for the marginalized and a fervent desire for justice, disrupted the Temple to highlight the necessity for systemic political and religious reform is often deemed too radical and contentious. Consequently, this portrayal has been supplanted by the gentle and serene Jesus, depicted as wandering the hills with a lamb over his shoulders, embodying boundless patience, and remaining detached from public debates about poverty, injustice, oppression, and war.

But then the picture of a crucified Jesus upsets all of that. Jesus was executed by the state not because of his unlimited patience and quiet demeanor, but because of his insistence on justice. Jesus' holy impatience was born out of his anger at injustice. Anger is a powerful human emotion, and it can be a useful human emotion.

Anger driven underground is when anger becomes most dangerous. Anger that is not named and acknowledged manifests in resentment, rage, passive aggressive behavior, physical violence, abuse and addiction. We can only paper over our anger with politeness for a while, but if we refuse to find ways to use our anger to effect change, we together with those around us will become the victims of our rage.

But anger can also be the impetus to doing the work of love in the world. Anger is not the opposite of love. Anger is a vivid form of caring. Anger is not to be feared nearly as much as we ought to fear indifference. Our anger means we care. We care about what is happening to our fellow human beings.

Feminist theologian Beverly Wildung Harrison wrote, in an essay entitled, "The power of anger in the work of love." that rather than controlling or managing our anger, we need to harness the power of our anger so that we might be about the work of love in the world.

I believe Jesus, in his anger, is doing the work of love. As followers of Jesus, we might well ask ourselves: "Where are the angry Christians? While the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer. Where are the angry Christians? As the multi-national corporations obsess over their own concerns to make more and more money at the expense of planet earth. Where are the angry Christians? As children continue to struggle simply to survive in a world where genocide has become something we have chosen to tolerate. Where are the angry Christians?"

When angry people stand up and say "enough is enough" the seeds of hope that the world can become a different and better place are sown. Without anger there is no hope. Imagining Jesus flipping tables makes us uncomfortable, understandably. It's disruptive. But you know who saw a glimmer of hope as those tables flipped? The poor and powerless who were being exploited by nationalistic religion. For them, it was the day they saw someone take up for them. Maybe God hadn't forgotten about them after all.

Jesus disrupts with holy anger but he also disrupts with the outrageous things he said. First, he said that God intended the Temple to be a house of prayer for all people (no exceptions), and second, he said that the corrupted Temple would be destroyed and replaced by something new, which would be resurrected in its place.

The second thing we see is Radical Reconstruction - From Temple to Table.

While I do believe a part of Jesus' protest has to do with the injustices of the greedy money changers exploiting poor worshippers who wanted to make their sacrifices at the temple, I think it goes much further. It's not just the cost of sacrifice that Jesus protests, it is the

whole belief system associated with sacrifice, which is based on the long-held belief that God is angry and needs to be appeased with blood.

Brian McLaren writes:

Jesus is making a revolutionary proposal: the Temple could crumble. It could pass away, and its collapse wouldn't be the end of the world. If the Temple and the whole sacrifice-appeasement industrial complex that it represented came to an end, something better would rise from the rubble: a system of extravagant and generous grace, open to all people, devoid of appeasement in any form. A more human, loving, embodied way of relating to God, self, one another, and all creation.

Jesus sees the way of God's love creating tables, not temples. A table that just needs constant extensions to include everyone.

The temple had expanding concentric rings of holiness. Holy of holies. One man once a year. Holy place. Certain men, only priests. Jewish men. Jewish women. Righteous Gentiles.

Jesus tears them down. I believe when Jesus takes out the whip during the last week of his life, and what likely got him killed a few days later, he is saying "We will now do the God thing family style. Everybody, men, women, gentiles, sex workers, good people, bad people, tax collectors, everybody! Come sit at the table! The Reign of God is moving from a temple mentality of rituals and pecking orders and rigid hierarchy, and rules and purity codes and who's who, to "Let's just have a meal! Everybody is invited!"

Jesus says "THAT'S what the Reign of God is like!

I wonder, Stone Church, how this instructs us as we look to the future. What will need to happen to make us a table and not a temple?

In what ways through our structure and leadership are we a temple and not a table?

In what ways through our insistence on our own preferences are we a temple and not a table?

In what ways have we created our own temple walls within this church that make it hard for people to see their place at the table?

And can you see why Jesus put a table at the center of worship and not a sermon? Or a book? To be reminded each week when we gather that Jesus' realm is about longer tables and shorter walls? To enact the vision of Jesus when he said, "Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God."

Woody Guthrie said, "It's a folk singer's job to comfort disturbed people and disturb comfortable people." Seems like that is also the job of any community centered on Jesus, the disrupter of the status quo.

Amen.