

Can Anger be Love?

B-Lent 3: 1 Corinth. 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

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Adult Sermon:

This is one of the most challenging stories in the Gospels. It appears in all 4 Gospels, but in the other 3, it is near the end of Jesus' ministry, just after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and is part of what motivates the Jewish religious leaders to arrest and ultimately cause Jesus to be crucified.

In John's Gospel, he moves the story to the beginning of Jesus' ministry as a "sign" of who Jesus really is, and why God sent him. Jesus becomes passionately angry, and physically whips the merchants and moneychangers, yells at them, and turns over their tables and pours out the coins. The merchants were selling "approved" animals to the people to be sacrificed, which was necessary in their tradition for forgiveness of sins. The moneychangers were exchanging Roman coins for Tyrian money, because the people couldn't donate money to the temple that had images of the Roman Emperors on them.

In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), Jesus accuses them of making the Temple, his Father's house, into a "den of robbers." The merchants and moneychangers were apparently abusing and taking advantage of the worshippers, who had to buy the animals to sacrifice, and exchange their coins to make offerings.

This story seems to suggest that there is a place for zeal and passion and even anger if we follow the Jesus Way, in our ministry and service of God. It suggests that sometimes anger is actually love.

That is a scary thing because anger often does not lead us to good places. Anger is most often associated with sin and bad decisions. But apparently, there are times -- if we are true "followers of the Jesus Way," -- that we may be called to real zeal, passion and anger.

In this situation, Jesus' anger is stirred up. He becomes zealous, when he sees a brokenness in religious practices and worship that have become "normal" and "accepted". If you are to make animal sacrifices, you need appropriate animals. Just like we need appropriate bread and wine for our table sacrifice. If you are making an offering to the Lord, you need to do it with "clean" money. But over time, practices that had been appropriate and reasonable became distorted and abusive, especially to the poor and underprivileged. And as a result, worship was being polluted or distorted. People were missing the point.

Are there ways in which our traditional practices of church organization or even worship and liturgy have, over time, become distorted, and maybe even abusive or offensive to some? Could we be like many of the Jews in Jesus day, “asleep at the wheel”? Are we unconscious of serious distortions in our worship and church activities that are offending and maybe turning off others? Especially younger generations? Will we ever notice, or have the passion to address such problems, if no one else is willing to get angry and zealous and make a scene?

It is a natural and normal tendency in all religions and all faith communities, to become overly focused on the dogma and doctrines and rules and traditions, to the point of missing out on new things God is up to.

Churches are a lot like trees in the way they grow. Almost all the growth on a tree happens on the tree’s outer edges. The outer tips of branches and twigs and the outer layer of the trunk and branches is where the growth happens. Branches don’t really grow much in the middle and stretch. They grow mostly by adding to the outer tips. Almost all the growth in the diameter of the trunk is in the outer layers, just under the bark.

The tree definitely needs the hard, inner layers of the trunk for strength and support and structure, but most of the growth and the transportation of vital sugars happens on the tips of the branches and the outer layer just under the bark.

The same is basically true of churches. Where is God usually most active in a faith community? On the outer edges. That’s often where lives are being transformed, that’s where reconciliation with God and fellow humanity and creation is most evident. That’s where the most energy is. Where is most of the energy in our faith community? Primarily among the children, youth, newer members and a few weirdos. Not all the energy, but most of it.

Where do new ideas, new ministries come from? Mostly from our youth, newcomers and newer members, **and** some of those weirdos.

Don’t get me wrong. Just as the center of the trunk and the large branches are vital and necessary for a tree to be a tree and to be healthy, the strength and leadership of the committed core of the church is vital. But the core must always remember (and if they forget, be reminded,) that the real purpose of the trunk and the branches is to support the new growth on the edges, the tips of the branches and the outer layer of the trunk. Without all that activity on the edge, the tree will eventually die.

Like all other churches, we must fight the tendency to focus all or most of our attention on the established trunk and the branches, instead of the tips of the twigs and the outer layer. We must resist the temptation to make the sole or even primary focus of our worship and

education to meet the needs of the established trunk and branches, instead of the tips and outer edges.

And sometimes it may take some zeal and passion or even **anger** to wake us up to areas we need to focus on.

Overall, I think Rec has done a pretty good job through our history, of recognizing that many of the features of the old model of church are probably not working with younger generations and in our rapidly changing world.

We are actually starting something new, to focus on this reality. I have begun forming what I'm calling the "Young Adult Advisory Team." I am inviting a group of young adults, to come together and begin to explore what they think we need to be focusing on at Rec, if we want our branches to grow.

Most of our staff and most of the leadership in the church are made up of elders or at least mature members like me. Wisdom and maturity can be helpful in leadership. **And,** as Jesus exemplified in our Gospel reading, sometimes wisdom and maturity can get stuck in old ways that are no longer working for newcomers and younger generations.

Hopefully, maturing people like me, and many of you out there, can wake up and be willing to listen to younger generations and imagine what they need. And maybe we can empower our newer members and younger generations to push and lead us in new directions.

And maybe Jesus won't have to jump in the middle of all this and have a **temper tantrum**.