

“When Jesus Angers You”

March 17, 2019

Shadow Savior series – 2nd Sunday in Lent

On our Lenten journey together, we’re seeking to be honest - and to nurture honesty in our relationship with God. We bringing our questions to God and reflecting on the difficult parts of faith in Jesus, which is a very faithful thing to do.

Even our questions can become moments of anger sometimes, but we don’t always welcome anger. For many of us, anger is an emotion we don’t show - or at least we try to disguise it well. Our first response to ourselves and to others is “don’t be angry.” In our Western culture, especially in the Midwest, anger is not always a welcome emotion.

Just this week, I found myself feeling some anger and asking “why?” as I watched the news about another act of violence in New Zealand. Muslims killed in their place of worship because of an ideology that stands in direct opposition to the truth that all are created in the image of God - 50 lives lost. We cannot be silent about hatred and the evil it produces, and we must stand in solidarity with those who grieve and with those who seek to resist evil.

I found myself lamenting the loss of life after a plane crash in Ethiopia. I found myself angry at the blatant misuse of power and privilege by parents who paid for special treatment for college admissions. And apart from the international and national news, I found myself praying for people around me: those grieving after multiple losses in a short time, for those who live with chronic pain, for those seeking help for mental health, for those who continue to feel like the church isn’t a safe place for them, for those who are addicted, for those caring for others and wondering about what the future holds, for those battling illness, for young people in our community who need support and encouragement in education and a safe place to land, for those affected by a tornado on the east side of the state, and more.

And while I understand that the pain and struggles of this world are not Jesus’ fault, I do wonder why he doesn’t just take care of it. Do you ever want God to just take care of this? Why is there so much pain and suffering? Why can’t God do something about it - change hearts more quickly, make the path to healing clearer, offer wisdom that will bring hope, or something that will help?

So we’re walking with Jesus into the shadow places - the unclear, uncertain, and sometimes uncomfortable places. Jesus is our “Shadow Savior” - not always the Savior we want or expect - but the Savior we truly need. And today it’s clear that Jesus is the Savior who gets angry.

Maybe that's the way we've heard it before. *There was this time when Jesus got mad and made a mess in the Temple...* I got anonymous letter years ago from someone angry that the church I served was having a fundraiser on a Sunday because Jesus didn't want that. He went into the Temple and got mad because people were selling things there.

Yes, Jesus got mad - even angry. But it wasn't simply because of buying and selling. And yet, that's how this account is sometimes viewed. (In case you're wondering, the letter didn't stop the fundraiser especially because it wasn't signed). We went ahead and raised thousands that supported mission projects and made an impact in our community and around the world.

So why did Jesus get so angry? What might it have been like to be there and to watch? **SHOW MEDIA:** "40 Days: Temple Cleansing"

A powerful word about Jesus' anger and his desire for everyone to be able to worship. All four Gospel accounts have a version of this event. John puts it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry right after his first miracle of turning water to wine at the wedding in Cana. Matthew, Mark, and Luke put it in Jesus' final week after he comes into Jerusalem to shouts of "Hosanna!" Matthew doesn't include anything about a whip, but it's clear that Jesus is angry at what he sees there and the atmosphere at the Temple.

Maybe we've heard it explained as an example of Jesus' humanity—of his human emotion or even his anger. Even so, it may be difficult to imagine Jesus who gets angry and makes others angry. Perhaps we want Jesus to be meek and mild, soft-spoken and calm, and able to count to ten instead of blowing up. When Jesus turned the tables over, it was more than just anger or frustration. He made a statement about the religious institution of his day and challenged those in power and authority.

Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. This was an important festival for the Jews because they gathered at the Temple in Jerusalem to remember God's saving work in their lives. God set them free from the power of Egypt. God provided for them through the Law of Moses and gave quail and manna in the desert. Passover was a time to remember what God had done. And being a devout Jew, Jesus went into Jerusalem along with many others - some say more than 2 million people were there.

A part of the festival was going to the Temple to offer sacrifices to God. There was a Temple tax to pay, and to offer sacrifices, people needed to buy animals. And because they were coming from far away, many of them had to exchange currency for it to be acceptable in the Temple. So it wasn't uncommon for the merchants selling animals and moneychangers to be there. That wasn't the real problem.

The problem was the system itself. The merchants and moneychangers were stationed in the Court of the Gentiles, making it difficult for them to worship fully. For some, offering sacrifices was more about showing off rather than making a true offering to God. And, like the woman shared, there was the reality that those who came to worship - some of them vulnerable and with limited resources - were taken advantage of. It was a prime example of social injustice and ignorance about true worship.

Have you ever been to an open-air market? When we've visited Croatia, the green market is a busy place with lots of vendors. Many of them invite you to try their fruits and vegetables. They'll barter and make sure you know that they have the best prices. It's noisy and chaotic.

Think of our farmers' market downtown. If you've been there on a busy Saturday morning, it's crowded. Sometimes vendors are encouraging you to come to their booth. People are talking to neighbors and friends. Musicians are playing. It can be noisy and chaotic.

Now the Temple wasn't supposed to be a market, but it had become that. The focus wasn't on the purpose of worship anymore, but on the ritual. There was a facade of worship, but there was no sense of reverence for God or God's holiness. The system wasn't working to bring people closer to God; it was making it more difficult for them to connect to God.

The Temple was viewed as the place where God's presence remained. But Jesus came as the Messiah—the Christ—to show all people that the power and presence of God went beyond the structures and institutions that were human creations. Worship is a place “where rest and trust meet at God's feet” - a powerful image - and something that all of us seek.

The power and presence of God are revealed in Jesus and would soon be shown in an unexpected way—in his death on the cross and in the miracle of his resurrection. Jesus' actions in the Temple challenge the status quo—what is accepted and what is expected. And it's a reminder to us to be open and willing to hear a new word from God because the Holy Spirit is active, guiding us to new understandings about who we're called to be.

Something else happens in Matthew's version of Jesus cleansing the Temple. After Jesus shows anger at the religious system, the blind and the lame come to him, and he heals them. The ones who had been left out are welcomed in by Jesus, and it makes the religious leaders upset. He's changing the system. This isn't just about turning over some tables and making a mess of things; Jesus is upending what is known and comfortable.

Honestly, there's some consolation in the fact that Jesus gets angry. I love to cheer Jesus on when he gets angry. I love to imagine him laying out judgment like the prophets did - reminding the people of what God really wants from them. We're on board when we see Jesus seeking justice, but then we can't escape the reality that Jesus' anger is directed at the religious system of the day. That's me and you right now, so we have to hear it, too.

How is Jesus speaking to us? What do we need to do differently to make sure that those who are seeking God can find a way in? Are we willing to extend grace as far and wide as God extends it to us - and to truly welcome all regardless of race, culture, ethnicity, economic status, theological and political conviction, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, age, or experience? I've heard this over the last few weeks: "I'd rather be excluded for being inclusive than be included for being exclusive." Where do we need to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

The state of the world may make us angry with lots of questions for God, but we must hear Jesus calling out to us - with anger because people are hurting and can't find a way in, with criticism when we lose our focus on worship, with deep conviction and love that we can and must follow him.

We're caught in the tension - to know that Jesus spoke to the religious folks of his day AND to realize that he speaks to us now. We're called to get angry about things that matter to Jesus - injustice, hatred, apathy - and let our anger spur us to action with the Holy Spirit's leading. God's Spirit is a force to be reckoned with. It moves where it will, when it will, and how it will, and we better be ready.

The Gospel challenges us to be open to a fresh new revelation of God's love. We're sent out to be people who show the love of Jesus Christ. We do more than just talk about Jesus—we have to be open enough to show Jesus and also to be shown Jesus. I saw Jesus in the example of the man in England who went to his neighborhood mosque and stood in solidarity with the Muslim community as they grieved. We have to be open to signs of resurrection—of new life.

Jesus cleansed the Temple out of love for people who were searching for God. When tables are turned over, the Good News is told. And that's our priority—in this and every moment. Jesus came that we might know God's love for us personally. And because we know, we work to make new ways for others to know how much God loves and cares for this world and every person in it.

May God help us. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

In this season, we'll be invited to pray and reflect in worship, even writing some reflections if you feel led. As we seek to be honest with God, I ask us to consider two questions:

Do you ever feel angry by what Jesus says or does (or doesn't say or do)?

Have you ever been angry with Jesus?

What prayers are on your heart today as you offer God the struggles of faith?

Nothing can substitute for true devotion—when we go beyond appearances and focus our hearts on God in prayer.

Sing "O Lord, Hear My Prayer" (FWS 2200)

Let us pray...PRAYERS of the PEOPLE