



SUNDAY SERMON

Holy Anger

When I was arrested by the New Haven police in 1986, I was taken to a large holding pen. Eventually I – and the others with me – were issued a fine and released. Escorted out of the station, we were free to go. At the time, I was actively involved in Yale’s anti-apartheid movement. I was also writing a paper on civil obedience for my New Testament ethics seminar. I was arrested at a rally where we were making the case that the Yale Corporation should divest of its holdings in IBM and other corporations doing business in South Africa.

While I had not previously considered myself to be a political activist, Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s heartrending portrayal of the apartheid regime and his compelling call for peaceful overthrow through divestment struck a chord deep, deep within me. I had to take action, to do something.

Intense emotional events in our lives often indicate what matters most to us; they shape our identity. When we look back over the span of our lives, those times of emotional intensity – good and bad – have in large measure, made us who we are today. The things that really matter to me have changed through the years, but deep down most have to do with a sense of fairness, justice or integrity. I have only been arrested once – so far – but as I look back, I see defining moments of decision.

We just heard about Jesus cleansing the temple. All four Gospels contain this story. Matthew, Mark and Luke each place it within Jesus’ last days, as the final act, the last straw that prompts the authorities to arrest him. In contrast, John tells this story in the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Why? Perhaps to say, this is foundational; this is fundamental to who Jesus is, one of those defining emotional events. In selecting and sequencing the stories of Jesus, each Gospel writer is trying to make a particular point for a particular audience. John knows – and even says in our text – that after Jesus’ resurrection, his disciples will look back and remember the important turning points.

This follows Jesus’ first public act – of transforming water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. If, in Cana, Jesus revealed himself as one who would bring transformation and new life, in the cleansing of the temple, Jesus reveals that this new life will challenge and threaten the existing order.

He also reveals himself as an angry prophet. John does not use the word “angry” or “anger” but it’s clear Jesus is – angry. Some suggest this reveals Jesus as human. Perhaps. But I believe it also reveals Jesus as divine, as in God’s holy anger.

As we know, anger can be destructive, reactive, and erupt in ways that harm innocent parties. Anger is also an emotional tool to be used, a catalyst for useful discomfort; anger can generate heat that leads to change. Community organizers regularly ask people about anger as a way of getting at people’s passion: “what in the world they want to see changed?” “What keeps you up at night?” they ask. “What injustice can’t you stomach anymore?”

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DATE

Lent III
Sunday, Mar. 4, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

VERSE

John 2:13-22

It feels as though we're at something of a tipping point in this country today. Recent articles have spoken about middle class white women – of both parties – all across America taking matters into their own hands, organizing, running for office – sometimes coordinated with others, other times independently sparking to life. The women of #me too and the youth of #never again are a blaze of light – igniting long-smoldering anger that can generate heat and lead to change.

The disciples looked back after Jesus' resurrection and saw his cleansing of the temple both as a turning point, and as a revelation of Jesus' identity and God's justice. We may not know the implications of today's events until some time in the future we are looking back at the heat of this moment.

In the other Gospels, Jesus accuses the moneychangers of being crooks and robbers. In John's Gospel, Jesus makes no such accusation. Rather, it is the corruption of the entire temple cult with which he takes umbrage. Jewish law obligated the faithful to make sacrifice. Most of what we witness here is prescribed; it's right there in the Book of Leviticus. During the feast of the Passover, pilgrims came from all over. The moneychangers and vendors provided a much-needed service, exchanging currency for animals. What they were doing was legal, prescribed, and sanctioned.

Yet as happens whenever holiness is given into the hands of human beings, that which begins in purity, in time it often becomes corrupt – perhaps as a matter of mere expedience, not from malice or nefarious motives. This happens in the temple, the church, the nation, even our own bodies and selves. Laws that once served God or the common good, no longer do so.

With its tight grip and narrow prescription of holiness, the temple itself had become an obstacle. Jesus was himself the embodiment of a new order; his very being was a proclamation that God is not confined; holiness is not contained or finite. Jesus will spend the rest of his life overturning those things that keep the people from experiencing the presence of God.

Think of how he healed a man on the Sabbath; he broke the law to do that – perhaps under the rubric 'healing delayed is healing denied.' When the woman was caught in adultery, he challenged those without sin to cast the first stone, thereby reminding one and all of our need for forgiveness and grace. Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well – when Jews considered Samaritans unclean and men were not to be alone with women under any circumstances – defied all the taboos of ethnic relations. The list goes on.

Part of following Jesus is opening ourselves up: allowing his commitments to shape our commitments, letting what he got worked up about shape what we get worked about. Take some time to remember those events in your life imbued with intense emotion. What are your emotional turning points? Of deep love, compassion, grief, joy, or justice. How have those feelings motivated you, shaped the direction your life has taken? What narrative may be read in your own life?

If we were to sum up Jesus' life according to John's Gospel, everything Jesus did was an expression of God's love – for humankind and for the world. It was Jesus' love for us that got him killed. Which prompts us to wonder how our commitment to follow Christ and embody Christ puts us at risk, if it puts us at risk. When we look back, will we see that what moved Jesus also moved us?

One of my childhood heroes was Sir Thomas More. He gained most of my admiration through the play, *A Man For All Seasons* (by Robert Bolt). A devout well-respected man, More was chancellor to King Henry VIII of England. Through the Act of Supremacy, King Henry declared himself the Supreme head of the Church in England which, among other things, allowed him to render invalid his own marriage and free him to wed Anne Boleyn. The king did not need More's consent to the Act, but he desired it – and More would not give it. That decision cost More his head. At one point in the play, More was imprisoned in the Tower of London. The Archbishop of Canterbury and Duke of Norfolk have come one last time to entreat More to change his mind, and to sign on with the rest of them.

Says Norfolk, "I don't know whether the marriage was lawful or not. But, damn it Thomas.... You know these men [who signed]! Can't you do what I did, and come with us, for fellowship?"

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Thomas More replies, "And when we stand before God, and you are sent to Paradise for doing according to your conscience, and I am damned for not doing according to mine, will you come with me, for fellowship?"

And you? Will you act upon the dictates of your conscience? Will Jesus' cares and passions be your care and passion?

May you find courage and know the abiding grace of God. Amen.