

Homily – A Holy Anger

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March 4, 2018 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

If I were to ask you for some adjectives that describe Jesus, I am guessing that “angry” is not one you would put on your short list. As Christians, we sometimes think that we are not allowed to be angry. Anger seems to be the opposite of love. We are supposed to forgive and not be angry.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul asks, *“for as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?”*

And in the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus warns, *“I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council.”*

Again, for many, Christians are not supposed to be angry, and Jesus is not associated with anger.

So, what are we supposed to do with today’s Gospel reading in which Jesus turns over the tables and drives the money changers out of the Temple. By the way, this is a story that is told in all four Gospels but it is in its most embellished form in the Gospel according to John, the story that Susan read to us this morning.

In this story Jesus is clearly and undeniably angry. One could even go so far as to say that Jesus has a violent response, though we could debate whether he is just a little violent or moderately violent. Be that as it may, Jesus was very angry and that anger led him to personally respond in a physical way.

And, Jesus’ anger seems to be directed at the money changes and animal sellers who were crowding the outer courts of the Temple. By extension, we might also see that his anger is directed at the powers that be, the

Temple priests, for they enabled and permitted the activities of the money changers and animal sellers.

Two thousand years ago, the donation and subsequent sacrifice of animals at the Temple were a standard and even required activity for observant Jews. And, since many traveled quite a distance to get to the Temple, they needed a place to buy, clean animals that were up to the rigid purity standards of the Temple. Furthermore, a Temple tax was required and it could not be paid in Greek or Roman coin since those coins had a image of the emperor on them. Thus, other coins were needed, and for a fee the money changers were happy to provide the proper currency.

But, Jesus directed his anger at the animal sellers and money changers, and the traditional Christian interpretation is that the prices and fees were exorbitantly high and abusive. This was especially burdensome to the poor who were trying to God at the Temple.

Now, let me digress for a moment to give a little more background to this anger of Jesus. Let me explain how the Temple building is structured. First, two thousand years ago, Jews believed that God's presence was actually in the innermost sanctum at the center of the Temple.

Second, the Temple was divided by architecture to define how close to God's presence different groups of people were allowed to come. The Gentiles, the non-Jews, were only allowed in the outmost courtyard of the Temple. They were the ones kept furthest from the place where God's presence dwelled. In your mind's eye, picture that the Court of the Gentiles wrapped itself all the way around the Temple, and within the Temple it was the furthest from God.

The Gentiles ethnically were non-Jews, and they were the least spiritually experienced at the Temple. From across the Roman Empire, and beyond, the Gentiles came in significant numbers the Jewish Temple. And, in the time of Jesus, keep in mind that the Gentiles had thousands of gods to choose amongst.

Conversely, the Jews were the first monotheists on the Earth. They are the first ones to believe that there is only one God. Furthermore, the character and nature of the God that the Jews found in the Torah and the other books of the Hebrew Bible, was very different than the many gods worshiped by the Gentiles. Those gods were capricious and mean, and when many Gentiles heard about the Jewish God who was loving, just, compassionate and good they came in droves to the Temple to worship this God of the Jews. But again, the Temple architecture kept them at the greatest distance from the presence of God in the inner sanctum.

Now, back to the Temple structure. The next layer in from the Court of the Gentiles was the area in which Jewish women and children could go to worship. The next layers beyond that was where the Jewish men could go. And, the next layer beyond in that was for the Temple priests, and then next in was the Holy of Holies where it was believed that God presence abided.

Again, picture in your mind's eye, the Gentiles on the outside, Jewish women and children next in, followed by Jewish men, and Priests and the Holy of Holies.

Now, when Caiaphas, the High Priest, authorized a marketplace for worship supplies to setup in the Temple, where do you think he had that setup? It was in the Court of the Gentiles.

And, here is the rub. These spiritual seekers, these beginners, these folks who knew next to nothing about God, coming with their tender faith, these Gentiles had their place of worship turned into a marketplace by Caiaphas. The Gentiles had their place of worship turned into a three-ring circus for extortionists. Mark's version of this story even indicates that merchants were using the Courtyard of the Gentiles as a short-cut to get their commodities from one part of town to another. And, when Jesus saw the most spiritually vulnerable people in the Temple being totally disregarded, he was outraged. Not only were the poor being abused by high prices and fees, but the newcomers and spiritual outsiders were being marginalized. And Jesus turned his anger and outrage into physical action.

Jesus' whole mission on earth was to bring people to God. His birth, his teaching, his way of living, his death, and his resurrection were all to bring people closer to God.

Is it no wonder that Jesus was outraged by official religious activities that hindered people on their spiritual journey? Religion was both impeding and misdirecting. The institution that was the hands and feet and voice of God had become something else entirely.

Now let me pull this forward to the twenty-first century. There are some things that we can learn from our Gospel reading, for two thousand years ago, the same things that didn't work for Jesus still don't work today. Here are three things that we need to learn and live into.

First, we must go the extra step for those that do not know God very well. If Jesus was outraged by a system that did not care for spiritual beginners and the spiritual seekers, then you and I need to go the extra mile to make sure these people get met.

Here is a simple question. Is anyone else being influenced towards faith in Christ because of your life? If the answer is "yes" then bravo! Keep up the good work. And, if the answer is "no", then you are not to just go off and feel guilty. Instead, pray to God that someone come into your life that you can lead towards Jesus. There is someone out there for whom you are a much more influential person than Billy Graham ever could be because of who you are and how you are positioned in the world. So pray for that relationship.

Second, we must make sure the poor are welcomed and cared for. Our deacon, is good at reminding us about this through both her preaching and her actions. If it didn't work for Jesus to have a system that discriminated against the poor, then how can we so frequently be part of systems that keep the poor down? How can we make sure the poor are welcomed and cared for?

To this end we need to each go and give. We each need to physically go where someone is living under the condition of poverty. When we go to someone then the poor acquire faces and names. They become known to us and we to them. In addition, we must give. We need to open up our purse strings to those in need and shared the blessings we have from God. We must go and give for the poor.

Third, we must make sure that our religious observances are getting us to God, and by extension Jesus. Does anything we do here at St. Barnabas get in the way of healthy relationship with God others, and self. Does anything in our wider Church inhibit or hinder knowing our living God who is loving, just, compassionate and good? Are we being welcoming or are we being radically welcoming of those on the margins?

Jesus' ministry was to take every kind of person from every type of background into the heart of God's presence. In our spiritual journeys we are not called to spend our lives in the Courtyard of the Gentiles. We are called to move inward so that we eventually come into the presence and embrace of God. This is not a place reserved for clergy, or even long-time church-goers. It is the birthright of every single person who has lived.

So live into that bequest that we have from God, and make sure you help others do the same as well.