

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, MARCH 4, 2018,

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

A young girl who was writing a paper for school came to her father and asked, "Dad, what is the difference between anger and exasperation?"

The father replied, "It is mostly a matter of degree. Let me show you what I mean."

With that the father went to the telephone and dialed a number at random. To the man who answered the phone, he said, "Hello, is Melvin there?"

The man answered, "There is no one living here named Melvin. Why don't you learn to look up numbers before you dial?"

"See," said the father to his daughter. "That man was not a bit happy with our call. He was probably very busy with something and we annoyed him. Now watch...."

The father dialed the number again. "Hello, is Melvin there?" asked the father.

"Now look here!" came the heated reply. "You just called this number and I told you that there is no Melvin here! You've got lot of guts calling again!" The receiver slammed down hard.

The father turned to his daughter and said, "You see, that was anger. Now I'll show you what exasperation means."

He dialed the same number, and when a violent voice roared, "Hello!"

The father calmly said, "Hello, this is Melvin. Have there been any calls for me?"ⁱ

Whatever the difference, our gospel text for this morning shows Jesus is far from indifferent upon entering the temple, exhibiting both exasperation and anger at what he sees going on within its walls. Once in the temple halls Jesus encounters money-changers who are making a healthy profit for those who wished to purchase sacrificial animals to present to the priests and temple officials. You see, since the coins used in commerce and trade of the day were Roman coins, with the likeness of the emperor on them, it was considered blasphemy to do business with them in the confines of the temple courts. Money changers would exchange them instead for a denarius or some other local currency, but not before charging an exorbitant fee for the transaction, effectively robbing their fellow country folk in a kind of collusion with the state government. Jesus yells at them - - "stop making my Father's house a market place." What makes the actions of the temple officials even more egregious is that this is the time of Passover - - the holiest of days in the Jewish calendar. It would be as if we were

to charge \$100 to occupy a seat at Easter services, and double if we brought children with us - - it would not go over well.

The effect of Jesus' actions in driving out the sheep and cattle (and possibly the merchants too), his pouring out the coins and overturning the tables, his order for the dove-sellers to remove the doves (locked in cages, which is why he cannot drive them out with the whip) and for the temple to cease being a marketplace -- is to bring the selling to a halt. By taking on the temple's economic apparatus in this way, Jesus assumes the right to dictate temple practices.ⁱⁱ As one can imagine, the temple authorities were not well pleased by his actions, and they invoke divine retribution for Jesus' destruction of their place of work. Jesus offers a grand retort, providing a clue for the source of his authority: "this is my Father's house," he proclaims, which probably should have raised more eyebrows than the cleansing itself. The Gospel writer, John in this case, quotes *Psalm 69*, indicating that Jesus was merely fulfilling his mission as the son of God, and that his zeal or love of God led him to be so angrily destructive to those corrupting the temple. The money-changers and others present ask Jesus to validate his authority, expecting that like Moses and Aaron did before the Israelites, he would be able to perform "signs and wonders" that authenticated him as God's representative.

Jesus' response to his accusers leads to a misunderstanding on their part. They see it as impossible for Jesus to "raise" the temple in three days, given that the temple's expansion and renovation effort (begun by King Herod in 20 B.C.E.) *still* had not even been completed. To clarify the misunderstanding, John tells the reader that Jesus was not speaking of the temple at all, but of his body, and that this only becomes clear after the resurrection.ⁱⁱⁱ

Apparently, nothing he did on that day in particular, since we are early in *John* (chapter 2), would lead us to think that he gained many supporters or followers following his actions at the temple. This is not the final Passover of his life, like in the Synoptic gospels, *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*. John still needs to construct his story around two other Passovers yet to come in order to give time for the case to be built against Jesus when the religious authorities could collect enough evidence against him. Hence, there is much more that will happen as yet for us to fully understand how greatly Jesus angered those around him, and became enough of a political threat that they conspired against him, as he had predicted.

Having rehearsed the historical meaning of today's text, I wanted to pick up one of the themes that bother lots of folks, especially those who are Scriptural literalists. The idea that the more meek and mild Jesus we learned about as children - - the one who is presented as coming to us with peaceful hands outstretched from heaven on a cloud - - that he could be angry - - is a foreign concept. Yet Jesus, since he was human, got angry in the gospels, and more than a few times at that. As we saw in this morning's reading, Jesus gets angry due to the zeal for his Father's worship space, because he believes it should be a house for all people and that it should not be corrupted by commerce, especially that which hurts the poor and disadvantaged. Another time Jesus showed anger was in the synagogue of Capernaum, as related in *Mark*. When the Pharisees refused to answer Jesus' questions, "He looked around at them in anger, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts."^{iv} A third time he shows his anger is with Peter, when he rebukes him as in the story we heard last week, telling him "Get behind me, Satan!" And yet once more he gets angry (at least to my way of thinking) when he returns to Gethsemane and finds all the disciples asleep, asking "Could you not have stayed awake with me even one hour." If he wasn't angry, he was at least exasperated, and surely disappointed.

And then there is the moment in *Matthew* when he goes up against the scribes and Pharisees, saying, "Woe to you, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!" Likewise, in *Mark*, we find the story of the man with the withered hand who comes to Jesus for healing. Mark writes, "Again Jesus entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored." Mark seems to be really in tune with Jesus' anger, telling us yet another story of how mad Jesus could become. On another occasion, he relates that "they were bringing children to Jesus, that he might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to them, 'Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God.'"^v

Finally, we already know about how Jesus deals with demons, going up against them in the same language and tones he uses to speak to Peter.

I'm spending time with this anger management this morning for several reasons. Many times, we think of anger as a selfish, destructive emotion that we should eradicate from our lives altogether. However, the fact that Jesus did sometimes become angry indicates that anger itself, as an emotion, is amoral. This is borne out elsewhere in the New Testament. *The Letter to the Ephesians* instructs us "in your anger do not sin" and not to let the sun go down on our anger. The command is not to "avoid anger" (or suppress it or ignore it) but to deal with it properly, in a timely manner.^{vi} That's for us. Concomitantly, I believe it is important to remember just how human Jesus was in all his emotions. He carries with him some of the same anger of the Father that we see God express, perhaps in unhealthy ways, in the Old Testament. Still Jesus is united with us in our feelings and hurts, so much so that the phrase WWJD (What Would Jesus DO?) takes on real meaning as we try to maneuver through the challenges of our own lives. I want us to know it is okay to be angry. In fact, I believe, Jesus would approve.

Some biblical commentators say that it was no big deal that Jesus himself got mad because it was what they describe as "righteous anger." They say that "Righteous anger is that which expresses itself in a controlled way. It does not rant and rage, it does not swear and curse, it does not mock and sulk, it does not sink to self-pity and despair, it does not blow off people and storm away from them. Righteous anger is a controlled anger that moves toward good and specific ends."^{vii} But for me, this will not do. Jesus certainly ranted and raged, and it was not controlled.

I think too of Dr. King. King scholars are quick to point out that the man was complex and no stranger to anger. It came up in his life nearly every minute of every day. It motivated him. The scholar and columnist Ed Gilbreath, writing last year in *Christianity Today*, said "Unfortunately, King is known more today as a poetic patron saint of racial harmony than a provocative prophet of social justice, someone who [if the truth be known] by the end of his life had managed to get on just about everyone's last nerve. This surely is one reason why the scholar Cornel West has implored his audiences to resist the 'Santa Clausification of Martin Luther King.' And why historian Tim Tyson lamented, 'We have transformed King into a kind of innocuous black Santa Claus, genial and vacant, a benign vessel that

can be filled with whatever generic good wishes the occasion dictates.’ King, I believe, operated out of a Christian ethic of love that channeled his anger and hurt into a redemptive force for change. He called it “creative nonviolence.”^{viii} Yet it was a struggle, as it is today for those who wish to bring about social change to and for us...

When we were growing up my mother had a quote on our refrigerator door that said, “For every minute you are angry you lose sixty seconds of happiness.” If this be true, time is a-wasting, and still we, like Dr. King, like Jesus, like the many saints that have gone before us, need a game plan for our lives that will help us to deal righteously with the happenings of our days and the challenges of living, both on a personal plane and within the greater world around us. We can seek to be like Jesus, we can emulate Dr. King and others, we can imitate God, yet all that will not make us perfect. We still need to make choices, given that God has gifted us with free will. Let us start by being aware of whom we are, what we are called to, where we are meant to be in the plan of the universe; and let us pray that our choices keep us safe, fill others, and heal the hurts about and around us, making life worth living for us and worthwhile for our neighbor, as God and all the saints would wish it. And above all, let anger have its place, motivating us and bringing us in touch with divine justice and a greater understanding of what it takes to live in a world where mercy and grace are operative factors in how we live in the beloved community of God.

AMEN.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.
Pastor, BBCC

ⁱ source: <http://www.jokebuddha.com/Anger#ixzz58Fuz0uZq>

ⁱⁱ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1918

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} <https://www.gotquestions.org/Jesus-angry.html>

^v <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/christianity/2000/05/did-jesus-get-angry.aspx>

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} <https://www.challies.com/christian-living/3-marks-of-righteous-anger/>

^{viii} <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/january-web-only/angry-martin-luther-king.html>