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“Christ’s Temptations and Ours: Anger”

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Lakewood UMC

John 2:13-22

Of all of the many emotional temptations we face, anger can be the most satisfying of all. It feels good to get mad, sometimes, doesn't it? To lick your wounds, nurse grievances long past, to fantasize about confrontations yet to come, to dwell upon the pain you have received and the pain you have inflicted, to feel so morally righteous and personally vindicated—anger can be deeply satisfying. And the good news is that you can always find something to be angry about—people are always more than happy to irritate, annoy, bother and provoke you. Some people will regularly accommodate your need for righteous indignation.

How about driving as an endless source of anger inducing activity? Those people who blast by you in the fast lane on the freeway, then move over in front of you and immediately slow down? Or how about that really rude breach of freeway etiquette -- when you and 1,000 other cars have dutifully merged into one lane as you approach a big construction project -- only to watch helplessly as some bozo zips past all the standing traffic on the shoulder to get to the front of the line? Or people driving erratically while talking on a cell phone? Or people who get into the 20 items or less line at the supermarket with 45 items in their cart? Or people using food stamps to buy cigarettes?

As annoying as these and a hundred other incidents like them may be, they are still just annoyances, and really don't even register as things that should make us angry. These are events that for the most part affect us personally but not permanently. They really are no more than "pet peeves." But there are other events, other issues, that we witness or read about that reach out and wrench our souls, and should make us hopping mad. Those circumstances that reek of being wrong, unjust, outrageous, unfair just set off our "hot buttons. Such as:

The teenager driving drunk who kills innocent people.

An adult slapping a child on the face in the grocery store.

An elderly woman being bullied by a gang of bored street kids.

A gay teenager tormented and abused by his peers

An innocent animal being neglected or brutalized.

If a hot button has really been hit, you don't even think about the consequences of your actions. Before you know it, you are so angry, you have stepped in to do something. It has been said that the true measure of a person is the size of the things that make them mad. What makes you really mad?

I was raised with the strong message that nice girls should never get mad. We were to be the peacemakers, the nurturers, the ones who soothe and save. You don't want to be viewed as an "angry woman" you want to be nice, and so you learn to fear rage and suppress anger. And yet I have learned over the years that an incapacity for anger can be as unhealthy and dysfunctional as screaming all the time. Why is it that huge issues which should make us mad roll right off our backs, while we spend so much of our energies sweating the small stuff? And more often than not, our anger tends to be about us—ways that we have been hurt, slighted, offended, ignored. It is the anger of self-interest, when we only get upset about those things which relate to us. And yet, are people going to bed hungry in our community? Surely the government will do something about it. Are we rapidly destroying the earth? Leave it to future generations to worry about. But the sales clerk who was extraordinarily rude last week? Contact the manager and try to have her fired. So often our anger is misplaced, directed toward things that are just not that important in the overall scheme of things.

Jesus was a master at keeping the nagging, time-consuming, energy-sapping details of life at bay, while he focused on what was really important. Remember the feeding of the five thousand? Facing this enormous crowd, Jesus gave all his attention to healing and teaching about the coming kingdom of God. The disciples were the ones fussing about when and where the next meal would come from.

When arrested on trumped up charges and tried by a kangaroo court, Jesus faced tormentors who tried everything to get a rise out of him. They taunted him, they mocked him, spat on him, hit at him, humiliated him -- but they never succeeded in denting his dignity or cracking his composure. Jesus didn't respond in anger, did not waste his energy on trying to protect or defend himself. In so many situations he could not be baited, he would not give in to anger no matter how emotionally satisfying it might have been.

But today's gospel text demonstrates that Jesus definitely had hot buttons that could be pushed. Confronted with the busy, bustling scene in the temple courtyard, Jesus was suddenly struck by the futility of all that activity: the waste, the deception, the manipulation of God's intentions for selfish human purposes. This sacred space was being cheapened by greed and desire. The mockery of spirituality, using what was holy to promote that which was profane, hit Jesus in the face and he lost it. You might say that Jesus got whip-cracking mad.

- Mad at the temple being turned into a marketplace.
- Mad at the money-changers who had turned a holy obligation into a lucrative

profession.- Mad at the Passover pilgrims, who saw the temple as a place to transact a business deal, not to remember God's holy presence.

- Mad at the priests, who had let their love of law and ritual take precedence over their love for God.

- Mad at all the pointless sacrifices that caused the temple mount to swim with the innocent blood of dead animals instead of shine with the living Spirit of God.

This scene was a mockery of everything Jesus stood for and it clearly set him off.

In fact, the abuse of the sacred space and activity made Jesus so angry that he reacted instantaneously, without considering the risks he might be running. Jesus was trying to bring the divine presence back into God's holy temple. It had become nothing more than a slaughterhouse, a trading-house and a party-house. Jesus had to clean house in order to once again make room for God. It is a very rare example of Jesus upset, out of control, livid with anger. But he was angry not for himself because of wounded pride, ego, frustration or impatience. His anger was righteous, he was angry on God's behalf, and I believe there is a lesson there for us.

The next time you feel yourself getting really angry, ask yourself: is this righteous indignation or an aggravating annoyance? Is this a matter of justice, equality, compassion? Would God be glorified by my getting angry about this? In some cases, yes. But in most cases, no. There are things we should be angry about, and our anger should inspire us to action. At times we should get whip-cracking mad for God's sake. We need to move beyond the sentimental and intellectual love of God, to a more vigorous pursuit of God's justice, peace, righteousness and redemption. And if anger motivates us to do that, it is completely justified.

It should infuriate us that 36 million people, half of them children, live in poverty in the United States. It should infuriate us that every 3 seconds someone dies from AIDS in Africa. It should infuriate us the way racism, sexism and homophobia are still evident and acceptable in our society. It should infuriate us that there are between two to four million battered women in America. It should infuriate us that we have spent close to \$370 Billion on the war in Iraq, now entering into its 5<sup>th</sup> year. Of course, billions more will be spent before it is all over. It should infuriate us that people are still hungry, homeless, hopeless and forgotten. We should be hopping mad at those who take advantage of the poor, children, the elderly, the vulnerable and powerless. And we should be mad at the way religion has been used to judge, attack and condemn in the name of God. We should ask ourselves, what needs to be cleaned out of our temple in order to once again make our church a places where the Holy Spirit blows and breathes its life into all who worship here?

A man in Dadeville, Alabama let something very minor make him mad. He lost a Bible-quoting contest to Gabel Taylor. Gabel simply had a better grasp of Scripture, and could remember the most obscure verses. The man who lost became so angry that Gabel beat him at the Scripture quoting contest, he shot him in the head and killed him. He must have forgotten the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment, “thou shall not kill.”

We have to be selective about the things that make us mad. We have a choice in what we are going to get upset about, and so many things are not worth our precious energy and effort. We need to resist the temptation to hastily react, cling to our aggravations and take satisfaction from our grievances and grudges. We need to remember not to take things personally, believing that the world revolves around us.

Remember that in and of itself, anger is not necessarily sinful. The challenge comes in how we deal with it. Can it motivate us to action, inspire us to make a difference? Is it trying to teach us something? We can accept our anger and learn from it, asking ourselves, “What is this trying to show me? What do I need to deal with in my life?” Anger can manifest itself as resentment, bitterness, grudges or hostility, but it is always trying to tell us something about ourselves. Do we need more patience? Do we need to practice forgiveness? Do we need to let go of the need to control? We can learn to accept and own our anger, try to understand it, and express it in appropriate, nondestructive and useful ways for the betterment of the human condition.

Frankly, I am glad that we have the story of Jesus whip-cracking mad, overturning tables and throwing those people out of the Temple. It gives us a very human and endearing picture of Jesus. I am glad that we have this model of his righteous indignation as a guide for our own. I hope we will be similarly angry about those things that mock God and diminish humanity. And there are enough such things in this world to keep us angry for the rest of our lives. May our righteous anger inspire us to act like Jesus, on behalf of justice, liberation, and equality for all people everywhere.

Thanks Be To God

