

John 2:13-22
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“Harness Anger in the Work of Love”

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As a child in the church, I knew Jesus was both human and divine. But somehow, I never imagined him expressing his emotions in a particularly strong way. Jesus would never wear his anger, or sorrow on his sleeve. I couldn't picture Jesus becoming angry enough to scare others, or sad enough to make other people's hearts sink too. You can imagine my heart racing with fear when my 6th grade confirmation teacher exemplified Jesus' actions in the temple by yelling loudly as he went and flipped over a folding table in the far end of our classroom.

The Story in John's gospel is a scary one. Jesus knew that this sort of thing with the money changers went on in the temple court. What was different on this day?

While anger is one of the seven deadly sins, we might make a distinction. There is destructive anger. Then, as a colleague says, there is anger at injustice which is to be “harnessed in the work of love.” There are several episodes in the gospels in which Jesus becomes angry at injustice, and this is one of them.

New Testament professor, Dr. John Dominic Crossan writes about this temple scene, “Jesus was not against the temple as such, and not against the priesthood as such. This was a protest from the prophetic heart of Judaism against the cooperation of some Jewish religious leaders with the occupying Roman forces, AND a statement on the way the consumer market can begin to control the purpose of Christ's church; which is, Jesus says, to be “a house of prayer for all the nations.”

The church over the ages has often been uncomfortable with Prophetic teachings and actions. I admit my own discomfort this week when I read an email from a Catholic friend titled, “I am going to get arrested today.” “What?” I thought. “Will you need me to bail you out? Why get arrested, there has to be another way.” Yet in her mind, civil disobedience, or we might call it “Holy Obedience” was THAT important to her.

I think this is what is going on in Jesus today. Jesus, knowing the potential consequences, decided to confront a practice that had contaminated the true purpose of the temple to be a house of prayer. Jesus is willing to risk his well-being to correct an injustice he simply cannot put up with anymore.

A UCC colleague of mine who is about to retire has served his congregation for several decades. He has mostly avoided taking strong stands on controversial subjects, especially in sermons and writings. But he wrote a recent cover letter for his church's newsletter saying, “after the pain of what I have seen in another School shooting, and the inspiring response of the youth, I can no longer remain silent about the issues involved.” He knows the article will not rest well with some in his congregation, people he has come to love very dearly. He knows this will upset some in the small community where he serves. It would never be in his

personality to trouble or anger anyone in for no good reason, or just to ruffle feathers for the fun of it. But, he hit his limit and felt God's call to respond.

I really believe most pastors are like my friend. We know when something we say is going to rattle or anger some in the congregation. We don't say those things with the intention of upsetting people, and we don't say them lightly or without prayerful consideration. But we do want the church to recognize when God's call is moving one or many of us to "harness the power of anger in the work of love."

Christian Author Jim Wallis puts the predicament like this, "You can't just keep pulling people's bodies out of the river without sending somebody upstream to see what or who is throwing them in." But we also know the truth in a statement made by, Dr. Crossan, "Those who live by compassion are often canonized, those who live by justice are often crucified."

I am aware the word "justice" is sometimes misused today. Some have coopted or even corrupted it to serve their own needs or repress another group unfairly. As people of God's Word, we need to continue to struggle as we seek to understand Justice. Through all the confusion though; we cannot deny the theme of God's Justice weaves its way through the Old and New Testament, and becomes a primary building block for Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God.

But here's the thing. God's Justice does not necessarily call you to get arrested, or march with signs, there are a myriad of ways to participate in God's justice. We each can prayerfully reflect upon the way God has gifted and prepared us to be involved in Justice. It may mean we re-open difficult conversations we others we have cut off. It may mean changes in our personal life which help us live more justly and peacefully. It may mean organizing resources or becoming a better Ally. It may mean examining the language we use or looking at assumptions we have previously not questioned. It could mean we write a letter. For others it may mean marching, or engaging in discussion at the tables of decision around which we sit.

Not everyone is called or gifted to turn over tables or run for office. The one thing I think we all can do is vote; vote in major elections, and minor elections.... vote our values... vote our faith. But beyond voting we are called to find our own ways to "Harness the power of anger in the work of love."

See, what we sometimes forget is... The one who marches, needs the one who writes letters. The one who runs for office needs the one willing to talk to their neighbor. The one who is ready to get arrested, needs the one who is working to become a better ally. And vice versa. Why though, why any of this?

A UCC devotional book for Lent a couple years ago was titled, "Spring Cleaning." I offer the closing story as a sample of how things can change when people of faith decide to rally their gifts in love.

Rev. Nancy Taylor, UCC Pastor writes, "In June of 1839 a Spanish Schooner named La Amistad sets sail from Havana, Cuba. On board are 53 captive Africans. The Spanish intend to sell the Africans into slavery, but the Africans revolt and seize control of the ship.

Observed for its erratic behavior, ragged sails and African crew, the Schooner is seized by the US Navy. The Africans are arrested, jailed and charged with murder and mutiny. Amistad is the story of evangelical abolitionists who wrestle with their bible—long into the night—until it reveals something inescapable about the nature of God: God is merciful. Convinced that God is merciful Christian Abolitionists raise funds for the legal defense of the captives. They learn their language, teach them to read and write, listen to their stories, companion them and supply them with Food and clothing.

The Amistad captives live under arrest for two years as the complicated and momentous case makes its way toward the U.S. Supreme Court. In March of 1841 the Supreme Court justices render their verdict: they decide in favor of the Africans. This represents the first civil rights victory of the U.S. Supreme Court. It represents a turning point in the cause of abolition. Most of all, it is a story about the triumph of mercy.

This story reveals the nature of God's heart... a heart of mercy.

Amen