

Righteous Anger

Menno Mennonite Church

March 7, 2021

Purpose: To put the work of Jesus and Jesus' anger into human context.

Message: There is room for prophetic anger rising out of conviction in our lives, and finding a way to deal with it is spiritually important.

Scripture: John 2:13-22

Synopsis: We don't like Jesus angry. With good reason. The savior of the world with a bit of rage should unsettle us. Often the solution we offer Jesus is the solution we offer ourselves: to either deny it ever happened or to explain it away as if it was of no consequence. Yet here we are: Jesus in full anger mode from the very beginning if we allow John's timeline to guide. In this encounter we are given a context for our anger and that of the holy one to bring our world and its irritations into focus.

<https://www.evernote.com/shard/s249/nl/31369896/d8e605b3-1eab-4a34-b5df-ebacd24f9bd8?title=Righteous%20Anger%20Gods%20Politics%203%20John%2021-21%2010-21-2012.docx>

<https://www.evernote.com/shard/s249/nl/31369896/754b4a55-e0ed-4a99-af1a-25b739229633?title=We%20don%E2%80%99t%20really%20believe%20in%20Jesus%20%7C%20Abnormal%20Anabaptist>

John 2:13-22

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near,
and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

¹⁴ In the temple he found people
selling cattle, sheep, and doves,
and the money changers seated at their tables.

¹⁵ Making a whip of cords,
he drove all of them out of the temple,
both the sheep and the cattle.

He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves,
“Take these things out of here!
Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written,
“Zeal for your house will consume me.”

¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?”

¹⁹ Jesus answered them,
“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

²⁰ The Jews then said,
“This temple has been under construction for forty-six years,
and will you raise it up in three days?”

²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

²² After he was raised from the dead,
his disciples remembered that he had said this;
and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Science Fiction, that one step-removed consideration of the world as it could be—has a lot to teach us about what is. As a genre it gives a glimpse into the future, which is either a good thing, assuring us that things do, in time, get better, or that they get much, much worse. There is the stuff we want—Space; the final frontier, jet packs and transporter beams—but also the stuff that we have and the struggles of the here and now. Take for instance the old archetype of the human robot story. You are given the robot—the image of perfection. They can do all of this superhuman stuff; leap tall buildings, bend steel, think and calculate to the nth degree all without the frailty and fragility of the human form. On the face of it, who would not want that. But as these stories often go, these emulations of our form can't quite get past their fatal flaw—the lack of human feeling. They can't emote; they can't feel, and without that they cannot be the human form in its fullest (assuming that they haven't gone full robot overlord, that is). It is the classic commentary of the human condition, causing us to hold up and value that which most of us would often just as soon do without. It is the human capacity for connection and caring that mostly saves the day and we can cheer for team humanity once again.

Believe it or not, I don't bring this up to give you indisputable proof that Bryce is indeed a geek of the first order—that ship has sailed a long time ago. Rather, I bring up robots with their sense of feeling and stunted humanity because I think many times that is what we turn to when we think of Jesus. We have the superhuman—by definition—the wholly divine thing that has him walking on water, raising the dead, redeeming humanity—the stuff that we worship about Jesus and rightly so and we hold that up. Because this we can revere and work with, and know how to work with in a deity. But then there is the wholly human part as well, and we are less sure if we even want that, let alone know what to do with it. So we turn Jesus into a robot. We hold onto the super human stuff, but don't let him feel, hurt, cry, doubt, or be anxious. Jesus isn't someone in our treatments of him who grieved deeply, laughed heartily or got all that angry. Take a look at some of the images we have here—is this a savior you would like to meet in the dark alley?

. Jesus can't be fully human because if he is, chances are he might look a bit too much like us, or more to the point, the parts of us that we don't like. So we blot it out. We have are so good at sanitizing our savior that when it comes time to then follow in his footsteps, we think that we too have to be like what we have made him to be; free from any emotion that might be interpreted as bad, mean, or somehow less than holy. We think that we have to be robots,

ignoring what we feel in anger, in order to be well behaved Christians. Especially within a tradition that is deeply suspicious of anger and its more violent offshoots. So what do we do with the conjunction of faith and anger?

Because it is a serious question of what we do with the anger at times. You have the Christian ideal on one hand—trying to be the little Christs we are indeed called to be and seeing the good in the world as best we can. But there are times where that simply and fully does not work out. We get angry at the world, at ourselves, at those who we love, at the situations that seem well beyond our control. We cry out for justice, we feel hatred to those who are other to us. That is our condition, and the world is not lacking for opportunities to be angry—righteously or otherwise. Sometimes, it can be one more thing that we end up feeling bad about that we get angry if we are trying to keep our sainthood intact (which will likely only make you mad at yourself again, beginning a vicious cycle). So what do we do with this.

I think that is what the cleansing of the temple is all about, and why the Gospels focus in on it as they do. Note that here in John it is the 3rd public act that Jesus does after an appearance at John's baptismal river and the wedding of Cana. In Luke, he cleanses the temple immediately following the triumphant entry to Jerusalem. In Mark, Jesus is still so angry after this, he curses a fig tree for not producing and it withers and dies. This was not some isolated incident of Jesus losing his cool. This was an announcing and culminating conflict with the way things are and the way of the kingdom that Jesus was declaring. I suggest that thinking about this in only symbolic terms doesn't hold a lot of water. Jesus here is angry fully, completely, and without apology. Taking this as we will, I think there are some notes that we need to make to have this make some sense.

First, I would suggest that we always know where our anger arises from. We tend to think that anger is the antithesis of love—and that it cannot be in the same thing at the same time. But I think that the opposite is true. We know that we are only angered by that we actually care for. The inconsequential things—say the Seahawks losing in the playoff early—might disappoint, sure, but not fully anger us. But when someone close to us fails to live up to what we expect things can get a bit dicey. I love my kids fully and desperately, but I am not about to stand here and pretend that there are moments in my parenting that I am just mad. That's when I try to step away and do something else, to be sure, but it is there and it is real driven out of my passion for them to become reasonably civilized beings along the way. We get angry about the

things that we love. Jesus is angry in this time because of the barriers being put up between God and the people that God loves. It is his passion, and out of that passion his anger rises. Love and anger go hand in hand for it is out of our loves that our passions express themselves. It is entirely logically consistent to have anger and love your enemy at the same time; not easy, but logically consistent.

Secondly, we need to be clear about what we are angry about. I think this is one of the greatest traps of social media. Without the near-to-hand knowledge of the humanity of the other person we are critiquing, it is easy to become angry with the person rather than channeling our wrath to that which we disagree with. I think that is part of the stew of anger we have going on right now—anger looking for a home. Being clear about what behaviors and situations you are angry about allows you first of all bring a bit of rationality to what is often a non-rational moment (and that always helps) but also to help differentiate between behavior and person, situation and structures, and reminds us that our anger is best directed against the situations that frustrate us, not those who represent those situations for us. I would argue that Jesus was whipping up a storm around the activities of the marketplace far more than Jesus was condemning the merchants who happened to be there.

Third, there are types of anger. There is the anger that we direct inward, the slight, the injury, the thing we just cannot seem to let go of—the anger of the self if you will. This is about reminding ourselves how bruised we are in the world, and is an anger that is easily fueled, and more easily still manipulated. There is much to be angry about, sure, but being angry and working from that place is way different than the prophetic anger that I think we see in Christ. Prophetic anger is the outrage at seeing the way the world works and wanting to fix it for the sake of the world, not merely to rid ourselves of inconvenience and annoyance. It is the anger that would call us to stand up against the powers and principalities that would destroy. It is the anger that spurs us to take risks to change, to pursue justice, to seek change in the situation. It is the anger born not out of love of self, but out of love others. It is the anger that Jesus bore on that day, and it is the anger that can work well for us today. By being clear what sort of anger we bring to the situation helps guard us against the all-too-easy ways that anger can get out of control, that can separate us from love, that can alienate us from the true purpose of anger; to inspire change and move us to new ways of speaking to our world. We know that anger long held and not expressed can destroy not just those at who it is directed, but also those who hold it

in the first place. By checking ourselves and *Knowing* our anger, we can grow into all the God is calling us to be. I think this is the true discipline of the faithfully angry—knowing that the longing for justice and change is the same longing expressed time and again as we seek God's will.

Know your anger, its nature, its object, and its reason, but then also ask yourself how does this work within the life of the Kingdom of God? I think that can be a good filter to know the convicting anger is present in us, and expressed rightly is part of the faithful witness of the love of Christ, far from the self-serving anger of remembered wrongs and perceived injustice. Sometimes the temple does indeed need to be cleansed, and we need a savior who can get there from time to time as well.

We know well what it is to be angry. We must allow ourselves to know anger and to express it, however it comes up within us. This is part of the gift of being human. But we cannot allow it to fester too long. We must know what anger we feed, and how we feed it. Because it can take on a life of its own, a life that will not allow us to love our enemies or anyone else for that matter. We do not choose to be angry or not. We are not robots, thanks be to God. We chose always and best whether that anger lead toward or away from the kingdom; and it is all in which side of anger we are going to feed.