

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Parables on the Way to the Cross: Compassion Culture
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Psalm 19; Matthew 21:12-17

Palm Sunday often gets put into the joyful celebration category and I totally understand why. We are heading into a week where everything Jesus does is shadowed by what will happen on Good Friday. This feels like our last chance to celebrate with Jesus. While Palm Sunday is a triumphant celebration, that focus can blind us to the full magnitude of this day. While the crowd was celebrating, anger, distrust, and unease began to arise within Jesus' closest circle. While the crowd was celebrating, fear, anger, and self-doubt plagued the religious and government authorities. Palm Sunday is a day where celebration was the overwhelming mood but if we zoom in a little closer we find remarkable clarity to Jesus' mindset in these final days before the cross.

The crowd's joy was bubbling just under the surface. It was Passover which meant celebration was in the air. The city was packed with people who had traveled from their homes to be in Jerusalem. Part of the Passover tradition is to make the pilgrimage to the Temple. These people have made it! Their journey is over and the festival is about to begin. And to top it all off a Rabbi who has been getting lots of buzz is arriving. It does not take much more to convince the crowd to give Jesus a grand welcome. Palm branches come down, coats come off and a spontaneous "red" carpet is laid out for Jesus.

While the crowd celebrated the emotional spectrum inside Jesus' circle was diverse. Some were probably bursting with pride and joy to be seen with Jesus in this moment. Peter probably smiled and nodded to the crowd. There were probably some introverted disciples that were petrified that the spotlight had been turned on them. And we can be pretty sure Judas at least had an inkling what this kind of attention meant. He probably saw through the happy smiles in the crowd and picked out the angry faces of the priests and soldiers. A riled up Passover crowd was not good news to local authorities. Judas may have even tried to convince Jesus to take a side alley to avoid instigating anything riotous.

Jesus knew though there was nothing that could be done to stop the events that were about to unfold. It was time to put all the cards on the table and let the game play out. There was one thing he needed to address in the Temple so he headed there first.

Now let's back up to Moses for a second and look at some realities about the temple. In Moses' time the "temple" was a tent of worship. Sacrifices are common practice because for a people who tend herds of livestock and have many animals, sacrificial animals make sense as a religious practice. They gave from the resources they had.

As Israel gets established as a nation the tent of worship becomes a more permanent structure aka a Temple. The jobs also diversify, a nation that lives in a more developed city needs some people who have other trades than just tending livestock. To provide sacrificial animals to people who do not tend animals

for a living, a practice began where animals could be bought in the market and taken to the Temple for religious sacrifices.

As time goes on the sacrificial animal sellers get closer and closer to the temple. Anyone who has worked in retail knows the power of cross selling. Ever wonder why those cute sandwich containers are hanging in the bread aisle? It's because salespeople have realized when you need bread you may be making sandwiches and you may also need a cute container for your sandwich. They put the bread and containers close together hoping you will buy both. Same thing happened in Ancient Jerusalem, the animal sacrifice sales people figured out the closer to the temple the more sales you get. And they eventually push into the courtyards of the temple itself..

The sellers who have the best relationship with the religious leaders even get permanent store fronts. They get this special treatment because they give a portion of their sales to the religious leader of course. If you are giving a cut to someone else you raise your prices a little. The prices climb and climb and climb.

This is the system Jesus walks into. A warped unjust system more convenient to those making a profit than to those trying to connect with God and practice their faith. A system where the poor can not afford to maintain their relationship with God. This makes Jesus Angry.

Jesus destroys the stores set up in the temple and shouts at the sellers as they leave the courtyard. Most Biblical scholars pinpoint this action as the spark that angers the powerful leaders to turn against Jesus. Before this Jesus was just an annoyance but of no threat. The moment Jesus attacks their income though, they plot to get rid of him for good.

As important as it is it is hard to not be shocked by Jesus' behavior. Our calm collected Jesus turned rioter!? and store smasher!? Our discomfort with this scene is possibly another reason why we like to focus on the celebration in the streets, rather than what is happening in the temple. We gladly join Jesus in celebration, happy to be at the table for maundy Thursday,, we don't even mind being at the foot of the cross, but an angry shop smashing Jesus is often left out of our holy week stories. And yet it is the moment that sets the whole week on its path. Jesus gets angry, acts on that anger, and those in power plot to end Jesus' influence forever.

Anger is a complicated emotion. Many of us have been hurt by another person's anger or even found ourselves in regrettable situations because of our own anger. It is natural for us to want to turn away from anything motivated by anger. Anger can easily get out of hand and fog our judgment. Yet here is Jesus angry and acting on that anger. Somewhere there is a line between holy anger and dangerous anger.

We actually see both kinds of anger develop in the story of Holy Week. We have Jesus' anger in the temple and we have the anger of the local authorities against Jesus. Jesus represents holy anger, and the authorities represent dangerous anger. The difference between the two are in patterns of behavior and who the anger serves.

The first difference is a difference in behavioral patterns. The behavior of the local religious and government leaders is following a predictable pattern. They get angry, they lash out. They get angry, they use their power to smash the offender. We can see this play out over and over again. When someone's anger causes them to have repeated or predictable outbursts this is damaging anger. It exists for the purpose of keeping control and exerting dominance. When someone develops a pattern of angry behavior even when they allow time for repentance and forgiveness it is a sign they have lost their ability to express themselves in other healthier ways. They never try to ask questions to get to the bottom of the offense. They don't allow time to calm down and talk a compromise through. Their anger always leads to a swift outburst and dangerous behavior.

When we see someone developing this pattern we can help them see their need for other coping mechanisms and we may need to set up boundaries to keep ourselves safe. Someone who has a pattern of angry behavior is dangerous no matter how long it has been since their last outburst. The pattern will return.

This is not the pattern we find in Jesus. The reason every gospel tells this story is because it was out of character for Jesus to act this way. The people around him suddenly sat up and paid attention because this was not his normal response.

We can see that Jesus tried to express his anger in lots of different ways first. The issues Jesus sees in the Temple are the issues he has been talking about for years. It's the same issue of people using religion to exclude people from God's love. Jesus tried calming expressing his anger in sermons and discourse with those who disagreed with him. Jesus tried painting images of the problem in carefully crafted parables. Jesus even showed solutions to the problem through his miracles and healings. He used every other way he could to communicate and create space to discuss before he came to this moment in the Temple. His message had not changed; with every ignored urging he doubled down on the message hoping someone would finally listen.

When we see the connection between Jesus' outburst and the message he was trying to teach it should be no surprise that he got to this point. There was a pattern, it wasn't a pattern of angry behavior but a pattern in the message. His message was the predictable pattern that grew into flipping tables and property damage. If they wouldn't listen to his calm words and public demonstrations maybe they would listen when he threatened their economic holdings.

Another difference between the anger of the authorities and the anger of Jesus is who the anger serves. Who the anger puts on the pedestal and gives power to.

The religious leaders are angry because they think they will lose their position. They convince the government authorities to be angry because they too could lose power if Jesus kept teaching. Their anger served themselves. It was there to maintain their position and power over the community. Self serving anger is dangerous anger.

Jesus' anger serves those most in need. In fact this outburst turns into a literal representation of how Jesus wants the system to work. It literally flips the Temple courtyard. I'm not talking about the tables this time I'm talking about where people were. When Jesus walks in the sellers and the rich are at the center of the activity with the poor and needy sneaking around them on the edges in the shadows to try and get a moment with God.

Jesus chases those in the center out of the courtyard and in Matthews' telling of this moment those in need rush in. Jesus' anger serves others by making a space for them to be heard and get their needs met. The people who were cast into the shadows and prevented from full participation in the Temple rush to Jesus finally having a place to be heard. Even little children recognize that Jesus' anger is something to be praised. This act of anger reset the courtyard in the way God intended the community to behave. The young and weak at the center get cared for while the stronger more powerful move to the outside to protect them and support them. Jesus' anger serves and lifts up those most in need.

Holy anger is anger that is out of character when expressed but can be traced back to messaging and communication that has been ignored in the past. Holy anger serves those least served and puts those in need at the center to be heard while the powerful listen into the center.

Anger does not have to be an emotion we reject as wrong. Anger can be the fuel that realigns our world with the Kin-dom of God. When we get angry or encounter anger in our world we can assess whose anger it is more like. Is it like the authorities who had a pattern of angry reactions and outbursts. Anger that served to maintain their power and keep the microphone for themselves. Or is it anger like Jesus. Out of character but rooted in a message long ignored. An anger that serves those most pushed to the edges of our community and lifts them up to be better heard.

Let us take a moment to assess the anger we have encountered recently and ask God for ways to support the Holy Anger in our world.