

“Risking Righteous Anger”

“There’s an old eastern story about a snake that lived on a path on the way to a famous temple in India. Many people would walk along the path to worship, and the snake would often bite people with his poisonous bite.”

“One time a swami, a religious teacher, was on his way to the temple when the snake jumped out to bite him. But before the snake could bite him, the swami put the snake into a trance and ordered him to stop biting people.

‘It is not right to bite people with your poisonous bite,’ the swami told him. **‘From now on, you shall not bite anyone.’**

A few months later, the swami was passing that way again, and he noticed the snake lying in the grass beside the path. The snake was all cut up and bruised and was in an awful state.

‘Whatever has happened to you, my friend?’ the swami asked. ‘Well, since you have put your spell on me,’ the snake explained, **‘I have been unable to defend myself. Please, give me back my bite.’**

‘You foolish snake,’ the swami answered. **‘I told you not to bite anyone. But I never said that you couldn’t hiss!’**”

The source of that story on the internet went on to say, **“In today’s Gospel story we see an angry Jesus, a hissing Jesus, if you will. A Jesus whom we likely feel rather uncomfortable with. This Jesus IS ANGRY.”** “Angry enough to use a whip made of cords.”

“We listen as Jesus expresses his anger by driving out cattle, sheep, and doves. He overturns the tables of the temple money changers. This can be rather surprising, if not shocking for us to hear.”

The source went on to ask, “After all, Jesus was meek and mild, soft-spoken, kind and gentle – wasn’t he? He was the one who taught us to turn the other cheek and love even our enemies. How could he become so angry and do what he did?”

The source concluded, **“If Jesus did not bite in this story, he surely hissed. So, the question we ask is why? Why did Jesus get so angry? And if Jesus got angry, is it OK for us to get angry?”** (SERMON 3rd Sunday in Lent March 11, 2012 posted on alutheranchurch.org)

In addition to those questions, the story of Jesus Cleansing the Temple from the Gospel of John poses another important question. This other question came to mind because of the placement of that event in the timeline of the Gospel of John. In the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus’ Cleansing of the Temple took place in the last week of Jesus’ Life and Public Ministry. However, in the Gospel of John, it was very early in Jesus’ Public Ministry. **Why did John put the Cleansing at that time in Jesus’ Ministry in his gospel?**

As I did an intensive study of the Gospel of John some years ago, I discovered helpful insights to answer that question. First, I concluded **John was correct in his placement of Jesus’ Cleansing of the Temple.** When you look closely at the text, a historical reference was provided in **verse 20, “It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple!”** That statement of the amount of time it had taken to renovate the Temple was only in John’s account, it was accurate, and it indicated John knew the facts about the event. **Further, the early act of Jesus Cleansing the Temple explains why the Pharisees and their allies, especially the priests, were dead set against him from the beginning of his ministry.** Some biblical scholars argue Mark is the oldest of the gospels, so they believe his version is likely the most accurate. However, although Matthew and Luke had copies of Mark’s gospel, they did not all agree about the timing of Jesus’ Cleansing the Temple. **Mark said the Cleansing took place on Monday of Holy Week, while Matthew and Luke placed it immediately after the Triumphant Entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.**

Obviously, one or all of those Synoptic Gospels’ sources were incorrect in their timing of the Cleansing. Mark knew the Cleansing did not take place on Palm Sunday during the last week of Jesus’ Life. However, he also was under the impression that during his Public Ministry, Jesus only visited Jerusalem one Passover Season, so he had to believe the Cleansing took place during that one week. **Since John knew Jesus visited Jerusalem during the**

Passover each of several years, he was not limited, as was Mark, in the options of when to report the event of the Cleansing. Therefore, my conclusion is John was correct when he reported the Cleansing of Temple was very early during the Public Ministry of Jesus.

Now, let's turn to the question, **"Why did Jesus do what he did during his Cleansing of the Temple?"** Aaron Arnold provides important insight for the answering of that question. He wrote, **"In my view, John wants to introduce us to the portrait of a 'radical' Jesus whose revelatory message supersedes and fulfills the tenets of Judaic law, even to the point that it abolishes aspects of this law, a theme that will continue throughout the rest of his gospel."**

Arnold elaborated, "Jesus replaced the Jewish system of animal sacrifice as offered in the temple since he himself would become the perfect lamb sacrificed for all sin throughout the entire expanse of time. However, this is not why Jesus chases out the moneychangers in the temple." **"Very simply, Jesus experienced a visceral disdain for the injustice that was taking place in his father's house. His father's house was ordained for worship, but it had been debased by becoming a house of commerce."** "Fundamentally, Jesus reacted against the loss of telos that the temple suffered. It had become distorted beyond recognition such that Jesus sought to purify it by ridding it of its pernicious element — the commerce itself. ..."

Arnold concluded, "Jesus illustrates for us that no" installation "of injustice is impervious to his power and might, and that ultimately, systems and institutions can be created anew." **"While the temple was not destroyed because of the commerce taking place therein, this commodification of the sacred exemplifies the type of injustice and sin that Jesus came to overcome. He represents the fulfillment of justice, love, and peace against the injustice, hate, and war that is constantly perpetuated by the governments of this world."** ("The Politics of John 2:13-25" by the editors [Aaron Arnold] posted on politicaltheology.com)

Why did Jesus act the way he did? **Why did he risk such righteous anger?** As Arnold indicated, the Jewish practices of Worship had changed over time from being a situation where people offered their sacrifices to God to renew and honor their Relationship with God to one where those in power were profiting commercially from the selling of sacrifices in the Temple. Prior to the Romans occupying Jerusalem the people did not have to use a different currency to buy sacrificial animals but after Roman occupation, the powers that be required the people to exchange Roman currency for a significant fee to have Temple money to buy the animals in the Temple for sacrifice. **In other words, the people, especially the poor and vulnerable, were being forced to corruptly line the pockets of the Religious Authorities to supposedly fulfill their religious responsibilities.** Jesus attacked that corrupt system as he sought to bring justice and liberate everyone, especially the poor and powerless, from the unjust and false religious demands. **Jesus came to offer God's Invitation and Welcome to All People into the New Faith Relationship with God and the New Life of agape love, faith, and justice exhibited by Jesus the Christ.**

This Worship Series reminds us of Jesus' example of Righteous Anger. We are called to follow his example of **Risking Righteous Anger to work to bring about Justice, especially for those, who have been oppressed.** This series also seeks to encourage us to have a source of comfort in what Jesus said and did during his Cleansing of the Temple. In the second half of the scripture, Jesus speaks of the Temple of his Body. It is a comforting metaphor. There is also some comfort in the flesh and blood of Jesus, overflowing with righteous anger and zeal for the House of God! In this passage, we are stirred up and moved by the idea that the House of God is Holy and that the Body of God, in Jesus Christ, is Holy. That holiness flows forth from the Temple into all of Creation. It may feel risky to put ourselves on display, our anger and our zeal, but perhaps this is the holy thing we are called to do. **We are created and called to put our New Faith Relationship with God on display through our work to bring Justice, Agape Love, Invitation, and Welcome to All People – our living the New Life in Jesus Christ and our demonstrating and risking Righteous Anger when we uncover injustice.** Amen.