

HOUSE CLEANING (Getting Whipped Into Shape) A 3LB Sermon by Dan Stern
March 15, 2009 at Broadview Church

At first glance, it's hard to see it any other way. Jesus seems to have thrown a fit. And we may just have to face it: there are aspects of Jesus' behaviour that would have undermined his credibility as a proper Sunday School teacher. He wouldn't likely have gained much status as a professional member of the clergy either. And... if Jesus *had* been a painter, his works of art would have been, like the Creator's wonder-filled world itself, continually overflowing with creativity's best... *and messiest* glory.

"God's glory is on tour in the skies, God-craft on exhibit across the horizon," the psalmist so rapturously expresses it. "God's revelation is whole and true and accurate," and so too is Jesus' example as to how to live our lives. Yet being whole and true and accurate does not make a person of faith's way in the world neat, easy, or mess-free. We still live, after all, in a world that gets it all appallingly wrong, that lets greed run-amuck, that allows unregulated capitol to cause vast human suffering - temple taxes, massive ponzi schemes. All this complicates our getting calm, serene, clarity from God in Christ; in fact, it makes us angry! Some things SHOULD make us angry. Many who always carefully color in between the lines, who always refrain from expressing what they consider "negative" emotions are, and I'm sorry to be so blunt, cowards. It DOES make me mad that Madoff 'made off' with all that money meant for non profit agencies, and even more, that the so-called 'regulators' didn't do their jobs, and even more than that, that the people in *charge* of the whole economy for the last couple decades didn't *insist* on proper regulations! How could any of us have been so foolish as to trust human nature alone, so easily prone to greed and avarice?

"Woe to him whom this world charms from Gospel duty!" wailed Father Mapple of the Whaleman's Church in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. "Woe to him who seeks to pour oil upon the water when God has brewed them into a gale! Woe to him who seeks to please rather than to appal! Woe to him whose good *name* is more to him than goodness!"

I've not exactly the whalemen's woe-wailing kind of a preacher. But I do think it important that we step back from time to time and take a look at our anger, considering what kind we or don't express, who or what it's directed at, and why, and also how we might better channel it in the future.

We're already about midway through the self-examining Season of Lent. And we who are sometimes or frequently church goers know that when we enter a church during this season, we're going to be expected to sing more than a few hymns in a minor key. Some, like the one we just sang, almost screams lines of angry protest:

The walls of gold entomb us, the swords of scorn divide;
As apathies increase, oppressive systems snare us.

From the profaning of value, from honor sacrificed...
From lies of pen and voice,
DELIVER us, O Christ!

How might the story about Jesus 'cleaning' the temple help deliver us? How might it help whip us into shape, so to speak? I used to think that the stories and life examples of Jesus pretty much taught a single lesson. Increasingly, I see each one as gloriously multi-faceted. Christian apologists over the centuries have tried to downplay Jesus' apparent burst of anger here by calling it something else. It was, of course, 'righteous indignation', not anger *per se*. It was 'a passionate protest', even 'a symbolic gesture of messianic purification.' All

of these are decent thoughtful interpretations. The Gospel of John is in fact quite clear in interpreting the temple cleansing metaphorically: the "temple", we are told, is Jesus' own body enduring a portion of the necessary death-resurrection cycle! But there's also hardly any getting around it: Jesus was, as they sometimes say, pissed off. Was that a GOOD thing?

There is medical evidence to suggest that the kind of personality that repeatedly represses his or her anger is the kind of person that gets quite sick. So for a time, the dominant psychological theory said pretty much categorically that if you're angry, you need to express it. Punch pillows. That sort of thing. And yet 'expressing' it constantly or cavalierly only made things worse, much increasing the amount of irritability, irrationality, and ill-health that got spread around in ourselves and in society. Since practice makes perfect, a much-practiced rage produces a near-perfect rage-aholic. Nurturing revenge fantasies increases blood pressure and other heart disease risk factors. As the old Chinese proverb puts it, "The person who seeks revenge should dig two graves." Two graves at the very minimum. If you happen to be a head of state intent on starting a war somewhere, we're talking easily scores of thousands of graves.

What we do with our anger matters. Maybe Jesus showed us the middle way - neither repressing anger nor letting anger go randomly unchanneled. Now I suppose if you were one of the money changers in the temple at the time, you would think Jesus WAS 'out of control'. You might even conclude that Jesus was being quite violent. I don't think that was the case. In my opinion, what Jesus was about there had nothing at all to do with personal grudges or revenge fantasies or throwing temper tantrums. Jesus' life and teachings as a whole consistently represented just the opposite - the forgiving of others, the love even of enemies. Overcoming evil with love is THE bedrock ethic of Jesus. And forgiveness - it is FAR more essential to our long-term health and ethical wholeness than is our anger.

But: are spontaneous bursts of anger sometimes appropriate? Well, maybe. If so, when? Why? To what end? Is anger okay when it's channelled to embolden a broad, unselfish purpose, but not okay when it nurses individual grudges and feeds petty self-aggrandizement? Maybe Jesus' demonstrative whip-welding house cleaning wasn't a spontaneous act at all. Maybe it was planned. Pre-meditated. Maybe Jesus had long pondered and prayed about how exactly he was to direct his passionate longing for social justice, and the Holy Spirit led him with clear intentionality to this very moment and place, to a moment and place in which he engages in a dramatic act of civil disobedience. He could have known it would have an impact, that it would be powerfully transformative for many as well as extremely dangerous to himself personally.

If that WAS the case, if he DID plan it that way, what was Jesus trying to accomplish? And why did Jesus pick the Jerusalem temple, of all places, to express himself so vehemently? The whole temple cult of required blood sacrifice could well have caused Jesus, who believed in a God of love and loved God's creatures, no end of grief. The blood of pure and innocent doves, goats, and cattle were being sold and slaughtered there every day - it was as if one had to twist God's angry arm and appease God's angry wrath with the spilling of more and more blood. "I hate, I despise your ritual sacrifices! I require mercy, not sacrifice!" said the Old Testament prophet Micah way back when. Jesus was right in sync with that in-your-face yet compassionate prophetic tradition.

Jesus was also protesting economic inequality. The majority of the peasant pilgrims who came to the temple were extremely poor, yet the priestly establishment rigged the system so animals had to be bought in the temple marketplace at fixed high prices if they were to pass inspection as unblemished offerings. A high commission was also charged on the

exchange of Roman money required for monetary offerings - the commission alone cost two or three days wages. This atmosphere of unbridled capitalism had taken over the house of God, making quiet, focused prayer impossible. Even the very design of the place was rigidly insider/outsider - it did not allow Gentiles to enter at all - never mind that the temple's original intent was to have been a beacon of light to all nations. Even among the Jews, only the most wealthy elites were allowed to approach its innermost sanctums.

It COULD have been a spontaneous heart-felt reaction, kind of a crazy fit of zeal against the oppressiveness of it all. Such an interpretation endears Jesus to troubled souls everywhere. Twenty-plus centuries of certifiably crazy saints and slightly bonkers 'beautiful losers' have been drawn to this Jesus who didn't function as he's supposed to in society, and yet had something valuably counter-cultural to say and show it.

Of course, any unstable, hot-headed crank can overturn a few tables. Or holler at their spouses. Or upset a meeting in a burst of impatience or long-repressed resentment. None of *these* kinds of things are very helpful *at all*.

What if it wasn't a temper tantrum, but IF Jesus had carefully planned it from the start a Holy Spirit-inspired creative act of public guerrilla theatre? I don't think it's just because I have that small part in Jeff's upcoming play that I'm drawn to this particular interpretation. What if it was a long thought out and prayed over deliberately dramatic presentation, Jesus' best next-to-the-last non-violent tactic against terribly entrenched cruelty and unfairness?

"Experiencing indignation is one mode of being connected to others", says Beverly Harrison. If we don't feel anything at all, we just don't care, we're connected to nothing and to no one. But if we follow the Christ who upset the money-changers tables, we HAVE to care, we have to feel that things in life matter. "Anger is a vivid form of caring...It is evidence, therefore, of the grace of God." (!) And though I don't believe in making fetishes out of any of our emotions, least of all anger, with all its destructive overdone potential, nevertheless I realize anger can, at times, be cleansing and freeing and good. God gave us our emotions for good reasons. It just helps to understand something of the purpose for which they're given. Anger's not a great thing to just let rip willy-nilly. It needs to find its most useful channel and best calling.

Every time we pray, "Thy will be done!" and really mean it, we should be harnessing our anger for the good. Did we mean it when we prayed and sang it this morning? We sang, "Awaken us to action, defying sect and faction; O God, Your will be done!"

But some may still be saying. DOES it really matter? Was it WORTH it for Jesus to have made this scene, to have gone momentarily bonkers in this act of public defiance? What did it achieve besides making Jesus hated even more by those in authority who had vested interest in the status quo? Wasn't this protest a futile gesture? A highly-disturbing absurdity?

So it seems today for many. Some of us raise our voices, join protests, write letters to those in power, we direct plays, host fundraisers, act out our little scenes; we do the only things we know HOW to do again and again and again, trying to utilize our gifts to transform society and to build up the beloved alternative community. But where does it get us? Mostly our efforts appear to be futile: business as usual the very next day, or worse: maybe face the wrath of those who are threatened what we're trying so very hard to do.

Speaking truth to power has never been a cakewalk. "Yet as followers of the Christ who threw his weight around in the temple, we cannot do anything less. We have a go. (And

another, and another.) And we keep trusting that no effort we make will be wasted, that small deeds of compassionate outrage will continue to accumulate and eventually have their cumulative effect. We have no guarantee that we'll see the results during our own lifetimes. But by faith we keep doing what we have to, knowing that each deed of compassionate defiance, every act of angry love is received and blessed within the hidden management of the kingdom of God."

-Textweek paraphrased sample material

Anger in and of itself is not a sin; but the nursing of it is, the hardening of it into grudges and revenge, the fetishizing of anger directed against people rather than against things that hurt people - these ARE sins, and very much so. Anger, has to be channelled, handled with care, sometimes curtailed, lest it become violent and do untold harm.

Ephesians tells it to us clearly: "Be angry. But do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger." May it be so.