

Entering the Passion of Jesus

“The Temple: Risking Righteous Anger”

[Mark 11:15-19](#)

Through our current worship series, “Entering the Passion of Jesus,” which is based on Amy-Jill Levine’s book of the same title, we are slowing down and taking a closer look at moments in Jesus’ final days. Last Sunday, we reflected on the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Today, we come to the story of Jesus’ Cleansing of the Temple, recorded in the Gospel of Mark. As we heard, Jesus entered Jerusalem Temple and drove out the people who were selling and buying, overturned the tables of the money changers, and the seats of those who sold doves. He stopped people from carrying anything through the temple. And when religious leaders heard what Jesus did in the Temple, they started looking for ways to kill him.

This incident is found in all 4 Gospels. In the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this is an incident that happens soon after Jesus enters Jerusalem. But, in the Gospel of John, this happens at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, right after he turns water into wine at a wedding in Cana.

This story is often used to prove that Jesus, just like us, had a full range of emotions, including anger. But, none of the 4 versions actually mentions the word, anger or angry, though they imply that Jesus was angry. The synoptic Gospels simply describe the actions that Jesus takes: he drove out those who were selling and those who were buying in the Temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. The Gospel of John gives us more details of the incident, including the words Jesus spoke to the merchants (John 2:13-21). Jesus said, *“Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s House a marketplace!”* (v.16)

To better understand Jesus’ actions and words, we need to look into the context of the story, especially the setting where it occurred — the Jerusalem Temple. Originally, the Jerusalem Temple was built by King Solomon on the Temple Mount. The first Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC, and was rebuilt several decades later. About 500 hundred years later, King Herod renovated and expanded the Temple. By the time of Jesus’ ministry, the Temple complex had been under construction for 46 years.

The size of Jerusalem Temple was enormous. It was the equivalent of 12 soccer fields. The giant Temple was divided into several courts. First, there was the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was housed. The only person who could enter the most sacred place at the Temple was the high priest; and even he was allowed to enter there only once a year to ask for God’s forgiveness for himself and on behalf of his people. Outside of the Holy of Holies was the Court of the Priests, where all the rituals of sacrifice were done. After that were the Court of Israel and the Court of Women, where the Jews gathered to worship. Then, there was the outer court, called the Court of the Gentiles.

When you hear the word, temple, you might imagine it to be a quiet place. But, actually, it was quite the opposite. Levine says, “It was a tourist attraction, especially during the pilgrimage festivals.” All the Jews were required to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem Temple 3 times a year and offer sacrifices to God: For Passover in the spring, for Shavuout (Pentecost) in the summer, and for Sukkot (Booths) in

the fall. Among the three holidays, Passover, the Feast of Freedom, drew the biggest crowd. Not only was the Temple bustling with activity, the whole city of Jerusalem was filled with life with the influx of pilgrims who had journeyed there from many different places, nearly doubling the population of people that lived there.

Waiting for the mass arrival of pilgrims at the Temple were merchants and money changers. Jewish worship during Jesus' time involved the sacrifice of animals, and Jerusalem Temple was the only place where sacrifices could be offered. But, pilgrims did not want to bring with them their own animals for sacrifice. They did not want to risk losing the animals or having them be injured during their pilgrimage, making them unfit for sacrifice. Thus, it was necessary to have vendors on site, so the pilgrims could buy animals to sacrifice. And pilgrims also needed money changers at the Temple in order to exchange the Roman Empire's currency into the coins that the Temple accepted. All of this commercial activity of selling and buying were done in the Court of the Gentiles.

Though Mark does not say that Jesus was angry, his actions seem to imply that he was, and we can get a sense of Jesus' anger, especially when we hear the words he spoke from the Gospel of John. So why was he angry? What was it about the scene unfolding at the Temple that moved him to action? Some people believe Jesus was angry because the vendors were cheating the pilgrims who were forced to use their services to offer up their required sacrifice. Some others believe Jesus was angry because business transactions became the central focus and activity at the Temple, and the true meaning of worship had been lost.

But, Levine offers up a different take. She points us to the words of Jesus Mark recorded in verse 17. Quoting an Old Testament passage (Isaiah 56:6-7), Jesus said "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for *all the nations*'?" Levine writes,

Gentiles were welcome in the Temple. In fact, the Temple was open to everyone. Men, women, slaves, Jews, Gentile, free people, rich people, poor people - the Temple was a house of prayer for everyone, and everyone was supposed to feel welcome.

There were, however, boundaries that Gentiles were not to cross. Torah mandates that one must "love your neighbor as yourself" and "love the stranger who dwells among you because you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:18, 34): thus, there are fellow Jews and there are strangers, but love encompasses all... the problem is not that the Temple excludes Gentiles [but that they are not fully welcomed].

It was wonderful that the Gentiles were welcomed in the Temple. Even a separate space was designated for them. But they were limited to the outermost court and forbidden to enter any of the inner courts. Warning signs in Greek and Latin were posted on the walls, and the Romans permitted the Jewish authorities to carry out the death penalty on anyone who dared to trespass. And so, for those only experiencing the Court of the Gentiles, the Temple was not a place of worship but a marketplace. With all the sounds of animals and all the business transactions going on, it probably was the noisiest place in the entire Temple. While it may have looked like everyone was welcomed at the Temple, there was a wall that separated the Gentiles from the Jewish believers. No matter how faithful, devoted, or generous they were, the Gentiles were always going to be outsiders, never good enough to be considered as part of the family of God.

By his death on the cross and resurrection, Jesus broke down the wall between the Gentiles and the Jews. But, the first Christian churches struggled to fully welcome the Gentiles into their fellowship.

Today, the Gentiles who have become insiders, the United Methodist Church, is still struggling with walls. We are struggling as a denomination to fully welcome LGBTQ persons in our midst. The message they often hear from the church is “You can come to worship with us. You are welcome here. But, you are not good enough to be fully one of us. You are not holy enough to be our spiritual leader. Remember? You are still a sinner. The Bible says so.”

Levine asks, “Are churches today houses of prayer for all people, or are they just for people who look like us, walk like us, and talk like us? How do we make other people feel welcome?” We believe that we are quite a welcoming congregation. And in many ways, we are. But, does everyone who walks into our sanctuary and worship with us feel welcome in our midst? If not, how can we welcome people more fully into this house of prayer for all people and all nations?

Perhaps, the separation of insiders and outsiders at the Temple angered Jesus. He had seen the injustice done to the Gentiles every time he visited the Temple. He knew something needed to be done. Knowing that it would be his last trip to the Temple, knowing that it would cost his own life, he decided to challenge the system. So, he drove out the merchants and money changers and turned over their tables. His actions were not simply anger. They were an expression of righteous and holy anger.

Levine says, “Righteous anger seeks restitution, not revenge; it seeks correction, not retribution.... The anger he[Jesus] forbids is anger against another person. But he does not forbid anger against systemic evils: hypocrisy, exploitation, harassment, molestation, drug pushing, and so on. Such forms of injustice should make us angry, and that anger should lead to constructive action.”

Sisters and Brothers, my siblings in Christ, are we willing to risk expressing our righteous anger? Are we willing to do the costly work of restitution and correction in our church, in our community, in our nation? May the Holy Spirit give us the eyes to see the systemic evils that act as walls of separation between us and our neighbors. May the Holy Spirit give us the ears to hear the suffering of those affected by injustice. And may the Holy Spirit give us the boldness to express a righteous anger that leads us to take constructive action. Amen.