

“LENT: A SEASON OF RISK – RISKING RIGHTEOUS ANGER”

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Mark 11:15-19

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We’ve probably all have some kind of image in mind when we hear the words of our text from Mark’s gospel account this morning. It’s Jesus cleansing the Temple. Maybe we’ve seen paintings depicting the scene or maybe we’ve watched a movie with Jesus, angry Jesus, driving out the merchants from the Temple and overturning the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. You can close your eyes and almost picture the chaos, Jesus like you’ve never imagined him, in a fit of rage, flipping tables, tossing chairs, and according to another gospel account he even made a whip of cords using it to drive out those selling animals and the money changers.

You don’t see Jesus this angry in many places in the gospel accounts. In fact, this may be the only place where Jesus gets physically angry. It seems out of character for him, this rabbi who preached forgiveness, love and mercy. So what set him off, what made Jesus so mad? What made Jesus risk righteous anger, an anger that led to the chief priests and the scribes to look for a way to kill him?

Remember this Lent, we are spending all of our time in what is known as the passion narrative, in Holy Week, those last days Jesus spent before his crucifixion. We are using Dr. A.J. Levine’s book, ***“Entering the Passion of Jesus,”*** as our guide through this Lenten season. The theme of the book and of our preaching is “risk,” what risks does Jesus take as he makes his way through these final days, what risks do his followers take and ultimately, how are we, Jesus’ disciples so far removed from that first Lent, called to risk in following Jesus today?

What made Jesus so angry? What made Jesus risk a righteous anger that caught the attention of the authorities and made them want to kill him? There have been many theories about the cause of Jesus’ anger. **Levine argues that most of those theories have not been founded on fact but more on common misconceptions.** When Sophie and I visited Israel a couple of years ago we were able to see the Temple Mount and we saw the remains of some portions of the wall that used to be part of the Temple that Jesus would have visited during his life.

You get a sense of the enormous size of the Temple when you see the wall and the size of the stones used to build the foundations. It’s estimated that the size of the Temple was about 12 soccer fields, placed end to end.

So this was a huge complex. The most inner portion of the Temple was called the Holy of Holies, the place where only the high priest could enter and only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, to ask for forgiveness for the people. Some accounts say that the priest would tie a rope around his waist as he entered in case he died due to God’s anger and he needed to be pulled out without anyone else having to go into the Holy of Holies. Outside that most inner

portion was what's called the Court of the Priests, reserved only for the priests, then the Court of Israel, open to Jewish men, then the Court of Women, open to Jewish women, followed by the most outward court, the Court of the Gentiles, which was open to anyone. The Temple was an inclusive place, all were welcomed to worship there, both Jew and Gentile, with the appropriate restrictions. If Jesus was angry, it wasn't because the Temple represented a system of exclusion, in fact, for its time, it was a remarkably inclusive place, where both women and Gentiles could participate.

You might have heard that Jesus was angry because the money changers and those selling animals were cheating the people who came to the Temple to worship. It's been said that those selling animals for sacrifice charged extremely high prices since they had pretty much a monopoly on those sacrificial animals. Kind of like airport vendors and movie theatres before their time! Others have argued that when the pilgrims came to give their offerings at the Temple, they had to change their currency into the currency of the Temple and in the exchanging of currency the money changers took advantage of the people. Was Jesus angry with the exploitation of the people by those selling the animals and those changing the currency? I've heard sermons that have asserted this, perhaps I might have even said something similar in one of my earlier sermons. But Levine points out that none of the gospel accounts indicate that any kind of financial exploitation was taking place at the Temple. There's no evidence that people were being gouged for either the price of the animals for sacrifice or on the exchange rate of currency. Levine argues that the people would not have stood for such blatant corruption taking place on their most holy of sites.¹

So then what was Jesus angry about? The text says that after Jesus drove out the animal sellers and overturned the tables of the money changers, he said, **"Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?' But you have made it a den of robbers."** Jesus quotes the prophet Jeremiah in these words. Jeremiah admonishes the Israelites, condemning them and calling them to repentance for the way they have misused the Temple. ***Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "we are safe!" – only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord.*** (Jeremiah 7:9-11)

When we understand the context of the words Jesus used, we get a better sense of what the source of Jesus' anger might be. 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?' Those words are in the form of a question and the answer to that question is, 'yes.' It was true that those from many nations came to pray at the Temple, both Jew and Gentile. That's not the issue. **The issue is the next line, 'but you have made it a den of robbers.'**

¹ A.J. Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*. p.49

We hear that phrase and we automatically assume that Jesus means that the merchants, sellers of animals and the money changers, were robbing the people with exorbitant prices and unfair exchange rates. And isn't that why Jesus drove them out and overturned their tables? But again, there's no evidence of that in our text or in any of the gospel accounts.

What we don't realize is that the phrase 'den of robbers' that Jesus uses, and that Jeremiah first used, doesn't mean a place where robbers to their robbing, where thieves do their thieving, but rather the word den means something like a cave, a hangout, a place where robbers retreat to after they've done their robbing and thieving elsewhere. **The den is their hangout, their safe place, again a reference to Jeremiah when he accuses those who have done wrong going to the Temple and thinking that they are safe there.**²

So when we come to see how Jeremiah used this phrase and how Jesus borrows it for his time, we see what's at the heart of Jesus' righteous anger. It's not high prices or unfair exchange rates. It's not that the Temple is some sort of exclusionary system that keeps people out. It is open to all and is a house of prayer for all nations. **The issue isn't the Temple but the hearts of the people, the hypocrisy of the people who lived their lives in any way they wanted, but then came to the Temple to pay their offerings and make their sacrifices but who never really sought transformation, never felt compelled to repent and turn from their wrong ways, but used the Temple as a place of safety, a hangout where they could just go through the motions of pretending to be sorry, but never truly examine their hearts and their conscience.**

The abuse of the Temple, the hypocrisy of the people who used the Temple as a den of robbers, as a place where people came to feel safe, even if they did nothing to change their ways, **this is what drove the righteous anger of Jesus.** This is what made Jesus angry enough to drive out the vendors who helped to perpetuate this hypocrisy and make a mess of the tables of the money changers who also served to propagate this fraud.

The system was broken. Instead of coming to the Temple, to God's house, to truly seek forgiveness, to humbly repent and turn from their old and sinful ways, **the people had been coming to go through empty gestures, performing rituals that had lost their true meaning and purpose, feeling like they were safe, when in fact nothing had really changed.** No wonder the chief priests and scribes were scared. No wonder they wanted Jesus dead. Jesus, in his righteous anger, challenged the system, the system that worked for those in power, the system that allowed them to prosper while robbing the people of the true purpose and meaning of what the Temple was meant to be.

When Jesus drove out the merchants and overturned the tables, when he caused chaos and commotion, **he drew attention to the hypocrisy, to the charade that the Temple worship had**

² Ibid. p.56

become. But his righteous anger also made him vulnerable. The risk that he took in calling out the cynicism and hypocrisy, in using the words of Jeremiah to stab at the heart of power, also led to those in power deciding to find a way to kill him because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. What if the words and actions of Jesus, what if his righteous anger got people thinking? What if Jesus risked his righteous anger and people responded? If they remembered the words of Jeremiah, that God had said that God was watching, that those who used the Temple as a den of robbers and made no effort to truly change and repent weren't overlooked or forgotten or ignored by God, but that God was watching, maybe they would turn and change, maybe they would be convicted by God's words and maybe the people wouldn't put up with the empty rituals and actions. Maybe the authority and power of the priests and scribes would be at risk. Well, that wasn't acceptable to them and so they sought a way to have Jesus killed.

Does the righteous anger of Jesus indict us today as it did the people of his time? Lent is a time of repentance, a season when we journey with Jesus to the cross, a process of deep reflection on what it cost Jesus to love us as he did. **Remember that forgiveness precedes repentance. God has in Jesus forgiven us, even while we are still in our sin. That love in this season of Lent should compel us to an honest repentance, a change in our words and actions, a turn from our old ways to a new way that follows Jesus.** Jesus is calling us out from a worship that doesn't engage our hearts, a worship in which we only hear the words up here in our heads and never let them engage us down here in our hearts. And don't get me wrong, it's not my words or A.J. Levine's insights, **it's the Holy Spirit which moves in and among us despite the inadequacy of my words or any human words, that invites us to true repentance, that draws us want to live and love differently.** We can't live any which way we want over the rest of the week, then come to worship and think that in sitting through an hour in front of the screen or even when we're back in the sanctuary or by giving an offering, that somehow we're safe, that we can just go back to how we're living once we leave.

My friends, may we invite the Spirit of God to truly transform us as we pray and praise and ponder in our worship. May we turn from the ways which go against God's desire for us and for life and may be truly repent and in that repenting realize how much God has loved us all along. **And in that love, may we go and risk our righteous anger at systems that perpetuate oppression and falsehood, may we speak truth to power, love to fear, grace to hate, hope to despair. May we challenge systems that work only for the powerful, the connected, the wealthy.** May we risk our righteous anger to follow Jesus in proclaiming and embodying the unfolding kingdom of God in our midst.

My friends, may we truly be open to change this Lent, to become people who will risk more, who will risk a holy discontent, a righteous anger at that which stifles life and muffles the transformative power of love. **May we follow Jesus, despite the risk, knowing that the life he calls us to is the life that we are all truly created for.** Thanks be to God, Amen!