

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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*The Heart of Anger*

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*Let us pray . . .*

Late one spring years and years ago, Max and I helped his mother find a dry stone mason to repair some gorgeous walls around her yard.

Eventually, we found someone and invited him to scope out the job and give us an estimate. He brought his book of previous work and it was beautiful. We all agreed he was perfect for what was needed and as he

began his craft and summer unfolded, it was clear he knew what he was doing.

And it was also clear as we got to know him across the summer, that he had an untamed edge that flashed in some unsettling ways. That edge worked well when channelled into the aesthetics of his masonry. His work was exquisite and it was easy to imagine it featured in DownEast Magazine. But in the end, that edge took away everything he had.

You see years later, it appeared that things heated up between this man and two of his tenants and in a fit of rage, he used a shotgun to end the argument and the lives of an 18 and 19 year old.

Anger can bring us to all our breaking places — All the parts inside that have been trained to be misshapen, denied or shoved down so deep we forgot they exist, so they lie in wait. Until something happens and we hit a flash-point and suddenly there it is, out there, exposed and destroying.

And afterward, there's usually a mess to clean up. And wounds made that sometimes never heal.

While I've never fully given into my anger, I don't kid myself that I too, could go off the edge. I have hit a few flash-points in my life. They're pretty terrifying because there's a place where things are out of control. We usually know we're out-of-control because either someone will step in with a "Whoa, whoa, whoa!," or fire back with an equal rage.

As such, anger gets a bad rap in our lives for understandable reasons. Mostly that bad rap is because our society doesn't talk about anger until after the fact. It's too bad because anger is a normal human emotion that can be used wisely. When miss-used, it can destroy, confuse and create profound if not irrevocable hurt and damage. But when used wisely, it can deconstruct and enlighten and make way for change. Or at the very least, open up a conversation.

Jesus knew how to use anger. And I think this morning's text invites us to to consider anger and its use.

A little background though:

While the Synoptic Gospels — Matthew, Mark and Luke — focus on Jesus' life, John's Gospel focuses on the theology of Jesus, opening up with some of the Bible's most gorgeous verses establishing Jesus' Divinity: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*

So early on, John connects Jesus to miracles and glory. Chapter 2, which Ken read from, begins with the story of Jesus' first miracle at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. That's when the host runs out of wine and Jesus changes a large volume of water into really good wine.

John's Jesus had to get believers on board somehow, and so he must have known people liked a good merlot and a great party. Suffice it to say, this helped make believers out of his disciples. And as such, signs and miracles become important in this Gospel. In fact critical to John's establishment and use of the words "signs" and "glory" is that these things are used to portray Jesus as embodying what is new, and what is displacing the old.

Establishing new understandings of God the Holy and shifting deeply held — in both memory and practice — deeply held beliefs needs enormous and dramatic language in order to assure these early Christians

1. who Jesus Christ was
2. what he meant for them
3. and how they should live their Christian lives in response to the challenge of Jesus.

So it's understandable that things would heat up and get testy in the process of establishing clarity.

While all four Gospels tell the story of the cleansing of the temple, the Synoptics place it near the end of Jesus' life, provoking the chief priests and scribes to plot to kill him, and scholars feel this is a more accurate timeline, as toward the end, it would be the precipitating incident for Jesus' crucifixion.

But John's Gospel places the cleansing at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and the raising of Lazarus is the precipitating event for his trial and crucifixion. In John's view, Jesus' life was not taken from him, but he laid it down of his own accord.

Scholars also say placement here accounts for the abruptness of the transition from the Cana wedding story.

So that's the backstory.

As to our lesson, while Passover was the holiest of the pilgrimage feasts to which Jews came to make sacrifices at the temple, it also put an extraordinary strain on the city. Scholars believe the population of Jerusalem more than tripled from 50,000 to 180,000 for Passover. As a result, the stress on local resources to house and feed that number of people would have been enormous. The crowding at the temple would be near gridlock.

Add angry Jesus to the mix and there must have been some complicated feelings when all was said and done — Unless you're in John's community, then you'd be hearing the story with satisfaction, saying to yourself, "That's right! Get down Jesus! We know who you are!"

You see, John's Gospel was written to a community who believed in the divinity of Jesus. That was fantastically radical back then. As a result, those believers were rejected by their mother church, the synagogue. And this rejection reflects a situation in which the people called 'the Jews' are in relentless conflict with Jesus and his followers. And the on-

the-ground discussion for John was around believers sacrificing the very connection they thought they had to God through their rituals, practices and the Temple. Now exposed to the wider world, they need reassurance and clarity.

So why was John's Jesus angry at what was usual and customary? After all, it was expected and necessary that oxen, sheep and doves would have been found in the temple, because people coming from far away couldn't bring their own animals. Only first-rate, unblemished animals were acceptable for sacrifice, so it'd have been difficult to maintain an animal in perfect condition even on a journey from nearby Galilee—impossible for those coming from Rome or Egypt or other faraway places.

Also, money exchange was required. Travelers brought coins from many nations, but only coins from the Phoenician city of Tyre could be used for the temple tax.



Additionally, those responsible for merchandising in the temple defended it by claiming that money generated by concessions was used to fund temple activities across the year.

But it didn't matter. Jesus felt betrayed and in that place, Jesus is hot on their heels with a whip, driving out sheep and cattle, demanding the merchants to get the doves out of there, dumping out coins, and flipping tables.

Anger.

It seems to be unavoidable because we all have stories of encountering it as either the giver or the receiver. But the thing with anger is, we need to know — as Jesus did — when and how to work with it.

Now, interestingly enough, in all 4 Gospel accounts of cleansing the temple, the focus is on what Jesus *did*; no actual emotion is attributed to him whatsoever. Rather, the writers simply describe what he does and

the response of those who witness it — in John it was the disciples and the Jewish religious authorities.

The event causes his disciples to remember. And the Jews, rather than firing back, respond, they don't react, they respond asking, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"

This seems an unusual response to such a show of anger. In her thoughtful reflection on this text, Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt writes that maybe the religious authorities somehow recognized what Jesus also knew — that his response, however disturbing, was deeply rooted in his grief at all the ways God's intent for life and hope and joy among the people had not taken hold — not even in what was to be the 'holiest' of places, the temple at Jerusalem. So maybe it was expressed in a way that those who witnessed it could see beyond the anger.

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I was with my mother when she first received her diagnosis of incurable colon cancer. We were all blurry and overwhelmed in the news. And in that blurry and overwhelmed place, I tried to navigate how to support my mom in telling the rest of the family.

It seems later that week I took a step too far when I confirmed the difficult news with my niece and relayed that to mom.

She was furious.

I'm not sure I have ever seen her so angry at what she felt was a betrayal. Only I didn't meet her with equal fury because in her rage, and because I was part of the story and I could see her fear and grief in the helplessness of what would ultimately be.

So I just listened and I asked more questions.

What would be helpful going forward?

What can I do for you now?

And, I'm sorry.

And so like others who have landed on similar conclusions, I too, find myself wondering how similar Jesus' grief must have been for my mom. There were things happening in her house, in her temple, that equated to grief that manifested itself in pure anger.

And so she drove out her despair.

And she poured out her pain.

And she flipped her composure.

And I'd like to think that I would have too.

And while the dry stone mason, also drove, poured and flipped in his own way, he lost sight of where his anger was coming from and blind rage can be deadly. He clearly was operating from an untended wound in his deep self, as do so many of us. And if that truth doesn't elicit universal grief, I don't know what will. Perhaps ultimately his betrayal was a culture that doesn't pay attention to grief until it's much too late.

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Hunt writes that God has given God's self to us from the beginning. And that in the story before us this morning and in so many other stories across time, it is not death which betrays God, but our choosing 'death' over life in so very many ways.

And Jesus responds to that betrayal in the temple. His grief is for a holy place which had been reduced to so very much less than that for which it was intended.

Beloveds, this story invites us to look at ourselves within its universal themes and to wonder:

- Does it make a difference to be able to see beyond the anger when it is unleashed?
- Does it make a difference to see that anger can be rooted deeply in grief?
- How are we like the money changers in the temple, caught up in the functional aspects and forgetting the sacred?
- Where and why and how do you understand God's grief?

- What grief do you have simmering in your deep self?
- Where do you have unhealed betrayals?

As Hunt writes, anger does not have to take away everything. We can use it to survey what is going on. My prayer for you is that when — not if — but when anger comes around you can take a deep breath and hold a vast and loving gaze. And from that place, hold something of God, and direct your anger toward what's important.