

Holy Anger

John 2:13-25

On this weekend when we remember and renew our commitment to the vision of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, when so many corporations and politicians from every direction put out quotes and statements in his memory, I want to take us back in history and remind us of the fact that Dr. King was a deeply polarizing prophetic figure.

USA Today noted that "According to an early 1968 [Harris Poll](#), the man whose half-century of martyrdom we celebrate this week died with a public disapproval rating of nearly 75%."

In recent years then, when people talk about Dr. King, it can sound like we are talking about different people.

Today, the King most people want to talk about is the one who painted a vision of our country on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, where "one day right down in Alabama little Black boys and Black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers" - a vision that captivates our imagination, that makes our hearts all fuzzy.

But there was also the King who garnered the attention of the FBI, who made many enemies in standing up to white racist power. FBI Agent William C. Sullivan, after his I Have a Dream speech, told his bosses: "We must mark him now, if we have not done so before, as the most dangerous Negro of the future in this Nation..."

Dr. King's life and witness exposed in many ways the reality that in his time, our country was made up of those who longed for change - and those who feared it.

Today, we must remember, because though things are better, our work is not done. King's vision for us is closer but still some distance away. And perhaps it is still true that many of us long for change - and many of us still fear it.

Perhaps there is something about this idea that the people who offer us the most compelling visions of transformation are often those who also demand much from us.

I believe Jesus knew what this was like - for even as he witnessed to a message of radical inclusion and forgiveness, he also demanded much from his people and from those who followed him.

When we as Christians talk about Jesus, we can do the same thing that many do about Dr. King - focus on the things we like and brush aside the things that make us uncomfortable.

Some of us talk just about the Jesus who began his ministry, as we heard last week, at the Wedding in Cana, a party animal, turning water into wine, extending God's abundance to his community. Some of us just want to focus on what Jesus can do for us - his healing power, his kindness, his grace.

But for every moment that makes us feel warm and fuzzy, there is the Jesus that we read today, who marched into the Temple courtyard and caused a scene, overturning tables, scattering the coins of the moneychangers, driving the animals out with a leather whip, and commanding the doves to be released. This almost seems like a reverse of the abundance of the wine at the wedding. This is chaos.

For Jesus, though, it continues to define who he is at the beginning of his ministry.

He is not a cosmic Santa Claus, giving gifts freely. He is not a divine lottery ticket.

Rather, he is the Messiah, the one called to fiercely usher in a fulfillment of God's wholeness and peace, "on earth as it is in heaven."

The implication in this Temple scene is that these moneychangers were not simply providing a convenient service to those coming to pray and offer sacrifices. This was not simply a case of convenience. Who wants to drag their cow miles to Jerusalem to be sacrificed when you can buy the same model at the gift shop just inside?

The hint is that there was more than convenience happening here - it was distracting. It was taking away from the sacredness of this place where God was believed to dwell. And no doubt, some of those merchants were skimming from the top, were taking advantage of those with just a few coins but hearts filled with remorse.

Jesus exhibited God's abundance - but he also exhibited God's justice.

Justice means right relationship - with the earth, with God, with one another.

Justice means not holding up the cattle, sheep, and doves in God's holy place, like death row inmates waiting for their execution dates - but treating them with dignity and respect, letting them be who God created them to be.

Justice means preserving space in our lives where God dwells in silence and awe, where anyone can come to the doorsteps of God's house and be welcomed.

Justice means preserving distinctions between the way we might carry ourselves out in the world in our over-productivity and messiness and how we approach and honor the holy. God demands more than what the world demands.

Jesus' actions threatened many religious leaders among his Jewish people, and it's why they questioned him, wondering what authority his signs came from. (Note: The Jews should be translated to Jewish leaders.)

No doubt, as our passage tells us in the final verses, the people were mesmerized by Jesus' actions. He was exciting to watch. Fearless. Insightful. Provocative. He was a Tik Tok viral video of his day.

Jesus however understood people - that these same crowds who loved him now would turn on him later. He knew that people could both long for justice and be afraid of it.

Returning to our present day, sometimes, I fear that the way we let corporations and politicians speak about Dr. King, especially those who say they respect him but then refuse to vote for or support policies that he preached, organized, and died for, is unacceptable. Those kinds of folks seem like those crowds who could be mesmerized but ultimately unwilling to welcome in this new community.

My colleague, Rev. Dr. Kearney of Turner Memorial AME, reminded me of Dr. King's words from a speech he gave: "We need leaders not in love with money but in love with justice. Not in love with publicity but in love with humanity."

Dr. King called this country - and us - to more, and his call was rooted in his understanding of a Jesus who came to do more than cover up our moral failures but to enable and empower us to bring about a changed world.

The fullness of Jesus is something we must always contend with as Disciples of Christ.

Jesus invites us to be witnesses to God's abundant grace.

But Jesus also invites us to discover our prophetic voices. To get angry about the injustice we see in this world. To get angry about how we treat one another and this planet.

In our bible study on Thursday night, we talked about the use of anger in our faith lives, and we recognized it is tricky. Anger leads us to writing Facebook posts that we regret a bit. Anger leads us to snapping at those we love. Anger leads us to shut down our mind to new perspectives. Anger leads us to saying terrible words that cannot be un-plucked from the air. Anger can get us into trouble.

But anger can also be a tool for justice.

Jesus used his anger at the corruption that spoiled his Father's house - but he did not use it to hurt and harm. His anger became a tool of liberation, freeing those that were caged in, freeing those who needed a place to meet God. His anger elevated and reminded the people of what they were about.

Ryan McAnnally-Linz of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture wrote last year, "When working rightly, anger transitions into problem-solving. It aims at its own overcoming."

A few questions we might ask ourselves as we deal with our anger:

- Are we angry at the real source of the injustice and evil we experience? Or are we misdirecting it?
- Have we taken our anger to God in prayer?
- Who else in our community is angry about the same things? How might we work together to hold each other and our system accountable?
- Does our anger make us unpopular with some who are fearful of change?
- Does our anger lead us to deeper into wholeness?

Even today, I believe Christ's righteous anger burns brightly for us - against the ways we have harmed and continue to harm one another. Christ's anger burns at the way our lives are consumed by evil. And Christ extends an invitation to all of us to receive more than just grace - but a transformation that might sanctify us and the world. Christ's anger would lead him to cleanse the temple - and it would lead him to face down the worst that evil in this world could bring on the cross, all to overcome that evil.

Sometimes, it's a good thing to be unpopular - it may mean we are pursuing God's way and not the world's way. May we walk in the way of Dr. King and his Savior, Jesus the Messiah, who came to enact justice for our sake and the sake of our world.

Words of Communion

Jesus' disciples, hearing their teacher promise to tear down the temple and rebuild it in three days, interpreted his words in light of his death.

Jesus' body became the new temple for those who followed him, an access way into the very heart of God.

As we gather at the table this morning, with our anger, with our pain, with our longing for a world of justice and wholeness, the invitation we receive today is his body - his temple - shared with us. I hope you choose to receive it.

For we remember, on the night in which Christ was betrayed...

Announcements

- MLK Event at 2 PM, cccadisciples.org
- Pilgrimage Christian Church, food distribution
- Vision Retreat: February 6, 2022

Closing Prayer

Remember these in prayer: Lorel Morrison, Betsy Hall-Wallace, the Gulick family, all those with COVID-19, Hamza and all folks on the street in this cold weather, our leaders

Let us pray,

God of Justice, God of Grace:

O, praise you for your anger against evil - praise you for your passion for justice - praise you for longing for wholeness for our divided world, for desiring to reconcile us to You, to our hurting landscape, and to one another.

Thank you for blessing us with your presence time and time again, through the gifts of the table and Holy Spirit, for nourishing us with daily bread.

Guide us in our use of anger in this divided time. Help us imagine solutions that lift up those who are poor and vulnerable, those who have been rejected, those who are deadnamed, those who are targets of violence.

Grieve with us in this pandemic as so many struggle to breathe, as doctors and nurses struggle with exhaustion, as families grieve the loss of loved ones.

Heal us from our divisions, from this disease of COVID-19, from the sins of racism and oppression. Deliver us from anti-semitism, anti-blackness, homophobia, misogyny, and fear of neighbor.

Commit us to honesty and to confession, for the ways many of us continue to enable injustice and mistreat our neighbors. Mark us as people of repentance.

Empower us to live into the vision of Beloved Community, to be open to your future, where one day we will walk enfolded in shalom with You.

Send us out to do your will, to get into good trouble, for the sake of your Reign on Earth, as it is in heaven.

In the name of our risen lord, Jesus, we pray, amen.