

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Mark 11:12-25, Ephesians 4:25-27 **“Anger: A Dangerous Friend”**

March 9, 2014
(First Sunday After Lent)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

MARK 11:12-25, EPHESIANS 4:25-27, "GOOD-N-ANGRY"

Likely Monday Of Holy Week

A. vv.12-14 CURSING OF THE FIG TREE, PART 1.

Fig Story Frames/Interprets Temple Story
Fig Tree = *Symbol For Israel*, Is. 34:4, Hos. 2:12

12	1	On the following day , when they came from Bethany,	Hos. 9:10,16-17; Mic. 4:4,7:1; Jer. 8:13,24:1-10, 29:17, Zech. 3:10
	2	he (Jesus) was <i>hungry</i> .	Cursing Is Omitted By Luke Hungry For Kingdom Realities (Nature/Temple)
13			Troublesome Story If Not Read Symbolically
	3	And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf,	Impressive Appearance, External Health, No Fruit
	4	he went to see if he could find anything on it.	Humanly Hungry, Less Than Omniscient Lev. 19:9, 23:22, Dt. 24:19
	4'	When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves,	Contradictions/Frame Point To Symbolic Use Jer. 8:13, Micah 7:1
	3'	for it was not the season for <u>figs</u> .	Reflects Faithlessness Of Temple Leadership 2x/Year, Season Of Year?/Opportunity? = <i>kairos</i> (Mk. 1:15)
14	2'	And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."	Clue To Read Story For Symbolic Meaning, Not Literal Curse Of Final Judgment/ Temple Leaders
	1'	And his disciples heard it.	Tree Shows No Signs Of God's Reign, Only Destructive Miracle On Object Story Leaves Us Hanging And The Disciples Wondering What Jesus Has Done

Israel Has Not Responded To Kingdom Option: Is Judged

B. vv.15-19 THE SYMBOLIC DESTRUCTION OF THE JERUSALEM TEMPLE.

Jesus Temporarily Cancels All Temple/Cultic Essentials, 15:38, 14:58

15	1	And <u>they came to Jerusalem</u> .	Planned Enacted Parable, He Decides What Is/Is Not Allowed In <i>My House!</i> Prophetic/Proleptic Action (v.15b), Jesus' <i>Temple Tantrum!</i>
Deed	2a	And he entered <i>the temple</i>	<i>temple</i> (3x), //11:11a, 13:2, Then Silence, Now Action
	b	and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought <i>in the temple</i> , and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons;	Acts Like He Owns The Place! Gentile Court, Recent Issue Under Caiaphas? Zech. 14:21, "no trader" Ritual Purity: Temple Coinage/Tax Sacrifice Of The Poorest, Lev. 12:2, 14:22
16	c	and he would not allow any one to carry any thing <i>through the temple</i> .	Not Improve/Purify But Cancel Entirely, Not Dishonest No Short-Cuts
17	2'	And he taught, and said to them, "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.'"	No Vessels Carried = Stopped Total Sacrificial System//13:2 Solemn Introduction, Prophetic Interpretation (v.17) Appeal To Scriptural Promises/Judgments Is. 56:7, 49:6 (LXX): Gentiles Jer. 7:2-4, 11 (LXX): Den=Place To Hide
Word			Shiloh Not Spared! <i>You</i> = v.18a, Bandit/Robbers (<i>Lestes</i>) = Revolutionaries
18	1'	And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching.	8:31, 10:33, 11:218, 3:6 He Was A Fundamental Threat To Their Religious World! Jer. 26:24, Motive, Deed + Word //1:22
19		And when evening came <u>they went out of the city</u> .	Gates Locked, Temple Destroyed By Rome In 70AD Need For New Way To Turn To God In Prayer

A' vv.20-25 CURSING OF THE FIG TREE PART 2, TEACHING ON FAITH/PRAYER.

Ancient Temples = Places Where Petitions Were Granted, "Prayer towards temple"

20	As they passed by in the morning ,	Jesus' Prophetic Action, Temple Not Cleansed but Destroyed, No Fruit	
	they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.	13:2, Utterly Destroyed, No Fruit Ever! Hos. 9:16, John 18:16, 31:12	
21	And Peter remembered and said to him, "Master, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered."	Later Memory Associated With 70AD Destruction	Jesus Word/Promise Is Powerful

EPHESIANS 4:25-27, WHEN ANGER BECOMES A SIN AND WORSE.

25	(-)	Therefore, putting away falsehood,	
	(+)	let everyone speak the truth with his neighbor, <u>for</u> we are members one of another.	No lying/ truth telling Reason: a real unity with Christ/ one another
26	(+)	Be angry	Necessary imperative of anger when boundaries are violated
	(-)	a) but do not sin;	Guidelines for anger: use it, but don't sin
	(-)	b) do not let the sun go down on your anger,	Guidelines for anger: use it, but with a time limit
27	(-)	c) and give no opportunity to the devil.	Guidelines for anger: vulnerable emotion, spiritual warfare

A BEGINNING ANALYSIS OF THE DEADLY SIN OF *ANGER*

CATEGORY	ANGER
Bodily Location	Face, Fist
Synonyms	Wrath, Fury, Rage
Brief Definition	Strong feelings of displeasure at a real or perceived slight, seeks vengeance.
T.V. Mnemonic: <i>Gilligan's Island</i>	The Captain (1 man, 2 vices: anger & gluttony)
*Corruption Of Something Good	Our innate sense of justice, boundaries
*Life as....	Life as the vigilant protection of personal rights
Healing Virtue	Patience, Self-awareness
Blessed are...	The Peacemakers, Mt. 5:9
One word: A	Accept
*Discipline	Surrender, Pursue Justice
Desire for...	Something "right"
*Stereotype	The Controller who uses anger, the Bully
Impairs a....	Skill in perception, not everything is an injustice or a slight
Biblical example	Cain who slew Able when his envy developed into anger, then murder
Commandments	3: Name in vain, 6: No murder, 8: No False witness
Effect on others	Danger from you and your anger
Key verses	Mt. 5:22, Eph. 4:26, James 1:19
*You become...	Violent/ Abusive
*Loss:	Freedom
*Hell is...	Not being acknowledged or listened to
*Leads to...	Hatred, Murder, Slander, Adrenal depletion, Emotionally callous
*Household item	Gun
*Theme song	Metallica: "The Unnamed Feeling"
Emerges as a new layer of the 8 stages (Erickson)...	Stage 2) Early childhood
Focuses On...	Justice
How Dante's Punishment fits the vice	Perpetual brawl beside the river Styx, eternity as a bar fight!
Social mapping of deadly sins in Nevada	Total number of violent crimes reported to FBI per capita
*Institutional	Loss of civility,
Cultural Forms	Rights assertion, Individualism
*Personal Evidence	Flying off the handle, major responses to minor infractions, bitterness, hatred, criminal record
*Excuse	"You're a jerk," "I'm not angry, I'm just emotional," "I'm Irish."
Secular Form	Loss of public civility and respect, decline of manners and courtesies

ANGER: A DANGEROUS FRIEND

*“Be angry, but do not sin;
do not let the sun go down on your anger and give no opportunity to the devil.”*

The command and limits of anger: no sin, no long burn, no open doors.

EPHESIANS 4:26

There is- I’ve read- a remote place in the Solomon Islands where a unique form of logging is practiced. If a tree is too large to be felled with an axe, the natives cut it down by yelling at it. Woodsmen with special powers creep up to the tree at dawn, surround it, and scream at the top of their lungs. They continue this for 30 days. The tree dies and falls over. The theory is that the hollering kills the spirit of the tree. According to villagers, it always works. Brian Cavanaugh comments:

“Ah, those poor innocent natives. Quaint jungle lore. Screaming at trees. How primitive. Me, yell? Well, I’ve yelled at my family, the telephone and TV, even the computer.... Have you noticed how we sophisticated moderns yell at traffic lights, umpires, and bank machines? Machines and things just sit there. Even kicking doesn’t always help. As for people, well, the Solomon Islanders have a point. Yelling at living things does tend to kill their spirit. Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words will break our hearts.”¹

To list anger- after pride and envy- as the third of the seven deadly sins is immediately to invite confusion because anger is not a sin but an emotion. As psychologists tell us, emotions may be pleasant or unpleasant, but they are not good

¹ *More Sower’s Seeds* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 83-84.

or bad in the strictly moral sense; they just are.² Only when the consent of the will is added does the emotion of anger have the potential to become a deadly sin against God, ourselves, and one another, which are the three dimensions of all sin.

By God's good design we are hard-wired with circuits for anger. Spiritual maturity mean coming to terms with anger, including the residual anger from our past which may be stored in our bodies, in various addictions and in habitual, unthinking responses. Mature Christians retain a deep capacity for anger followed by wise action, particularly when it involves issues of social injustice and religious hypocrisy. What Aristotle said could well apply to us Christians because it requires both a fruit of the Spirit- self-control, and a gift of the Spirit- discernment:

"Anybody can become angry," he said, "that is easy; but to be angry with the *right person*, and to the *right degree*, and at the *right time*, and for the *right purpose*, and in the *right way*- that is not within everybody's power and is not easy."³

Very little good would happen in this world unless someone had first been touched with enough anger to motivate action towards change. Think of the 19th century abolition movement which said slavery was evil and had to be resisted- even if it meant war, or the resistance to child labor which pulled children out of mines and factories, or the movement for women's suffrage which only a bit over a hundred years ago welcomed them into full citizenship. Outrage is the impetus to say No to injustice and cruelty and to call for a moral counter-weight. In the long run I believe our nation will say an increasing No to convenience abortions that are not a medical necessity. The tide is already beginning to turn, and the big turn is among the young- the generations after us baby boomers- who are waking up to the fact that theirs is the most aborted generation in history. A 2010 Gallup Poll revealed that 47 percent of eighteen to twenty-nine year old are pro-life, and that is a great shift.⁴

² For a newer reading of emotions as volitional, not just impulsive, see Gregory Clapper, *The Renewal Of The Heart Is The Mission Of The Church* (Eugene, OR: CAS-CADE Books, 2010), 51, "The idea that emotions are purely sensory experiences that happen outside of the input or control of cognitive capacities must surely be rejected."

³ Louisa Rogers, "Dealing with Anger" (St. Meinrad, IN: CareNotes, 1990), 1.

⁴ *Good News Magazine*, March/April 2014, inside cover.

On a personal level, anger has been a motivator on several occasions. I served on the board of the Mission Society for thirteen years because one day I got angry about what our denomination wasn't doing in missions. That we had gone from 2500 missionaries in the 1920's to less than 250 in the late 80's bothered me.⁵ I could no longer blame leaders; I had to do something more than pay apportionments and leave world missions to others. Did we believe the gospel any more as Methodists? In Columbia I joined the fight against porn and obscenity because I was angry about how it mis-educates men and portrayed women as objects instead of persons. I helped start a prison ministry that continues to this day because I didn't like the *lock-em up and throw away the key mentality* I saw in the culture. I serve on the Board of the Confessing Movement because of my deep concern with a denomination that habitually neglects its own teachings and seems to be always sticking its finger into the wind to see which ways the winds of intellectual fashion are blowing. It takes something more than anger to sustain a long-term commitments, but without anger-without a deep sense that something's wrong- you will never have the energy to break free of the gravitational pull of comfort and passivity. Anger is an impetus to action. Anger is energy to say No to wrong and Yes to a better alternative.

I'm told that most of the fuel in a rocket launch is spent breaking free of earth's gravity. That is anger's intense energy. It propels us to a new place by giving us an afterburner of fresh moral energy. Mothers Against Drunk Driving would never have been founded had not Candy Lighter turned the rage over her son's death into a creative channel of advocacy. Anger is a wonderful gift of God, but like all our capacities, it is touched and corrupted by the disease of sin which makes anger potent with danger. Anger is thus a mixed blessing.⁶ It is possible, by God's grace, to be *Good-n-Angry* as Jesus was with the temple and its leadership, and equally- without the restraint of God's guidance- for anger to destroy everything it touches like a flow of molten lava. Our second United Methodist baptismal vow cannot be understood apart from the energy of holy anger against all that makes and keep life less than fully human. We ask, "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to *resist* evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?"⁷

⁵ Well known statistics, quoted by Dr. George Hunter in his recent Denman lectures in Myrtle Beach at the 2011 U.M. Congress on Evangelism.

⁶ For a thorough treatment, see Andrew Lester, *The Angry Christian* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2003).

⁷ *U.M. Hymnal*: 34.

Anger ranges from mild annoyance all the way up to the uncontrollable rage of temporary insanity. An explosion of anger is *rage or fury*. In response to a perceived injustice we term it *righteous indignation*. Anger becomes *wrath* when it sets out to settle a score. When turned back into the self it often breeds *depression*. When sufficiently angry, our neck and face redden, veins bulge, blood pressure goes up as primitive circuits kick into overload. Anger is a signal something's wrong, either within me or around me. Mamie McCullough tells a story on herself:

"One hot summer evening, I was in the kitchen preparing dinner. We were all hot and tired, the phone kept ringing, the door bell was forever chiming, the kids were noisy- it was not a pleasant time.

When Brian came into the kitchen and said, 'Mama, why are you mad?'
'I'm not mad, Brian; take out the garbage.'

He took out the garbage and came back in. 'Mama, why are you mad?'
'Brian, I am not mad- set the table,'

He set the table. Then, 'Mama, why are you mad?'

I'd had it! I turned to him, look down into his amazed face and said, 'Brian, why do you think I'm mad?'

He looked up at me very seriously and said, 'Well, if you're not mad, you should notify your face.'"⁸

Dr. Arch Hart defines anger as "A strong feeling of displeasure excited by real or supposed injury: often accompanied by a desire to take revenge or to obtain satisfaction from the offending party."⁹ It was an insight for me to discover that anger is not a primary emotion. First come one of the more vulnerable emotions: hurt or embarrassment, helplessness or anxiety. Anger then arises as a shield of protection. "Don't cry; get mad and then get even" was a slogan my football coach drilled into us. Anger gives us a temporary feeling of power, of being a self with boundaries.

The first thing to do is to acknowledge anger without imposing a judgment on it. A second is to ask, What's underneath? So if you were told as a child not to get angry because anger itself is a sin, recognize you've been robbed of a valuable asset. Feel your anger; own it without immediately acting on it; look what's underneath. Anger has less chance of getting out of control if we're aware of the wounds or frustrations it protects.

⁸ Waco, TX: Word, 1990.

⁹ *Feeling Free* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1989), 62.

But anger can be destructive. The American Heart Association concluded that "chronic anger is so damaging as a risk factor for early death it ranks with- or even exceeds- cigarette smoking, obesity, and a high-fat diet."¹⁰ The gift of anger- if not modified by wisdom- can develop into the deadly sin of anger, a sort of constant burn that consumes the flesh. Frederick Buechner is on target when he writes:

"Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back; in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."¹¹

So if you are chronically angry, if you have a short fuse, you're not only scalding those close to you with your boiling temper, you're also cannibalizing yourself and depositing layers of callous over your soul's tender surface. We are not meant to live on anger or control others with it. It is a selective tool for occasional use. To live with rage and outrage is deadly. Read from Proverbs:

"The vexation of a fool is known at once,
but the prudent man ignores and insult."/

"He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty,
and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city."/

"Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man,
lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare."¹²

Think of the times you've spoken or acted blindly in anger and the hurt it's done. Sarcastic remarks, hurtful jokes, and teasing are often a cover for anger. We are not civilized human beings, much less mature Christians, till we learn the grace

¹⁰ Dr. Gary Collins, "Chronic Anger and Early Death, *Christian Counseling Newsletter*, Vol. V, No. 5, May 1991, 2.

¹¹ *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1973).

¹² 12:26, 16:32, 22:24-25.

of self-control and proper self-expression. There is nothing healthy about venting anger every time it begs for attention. It's not frankness but childish self-indulgence.

After the 2010 shooting of U.S. Representative Gabby Gifford in Tucson, *Scientific American* asked why some people control their anger and frustration, while others lack self-control. Professor Richard Nisbett- the world's greatest authority on intelligence- has plainly *said he'd rather have his son be high in self-control than intelligence*. According to Nisbett, self-control is key to a well-functioning life, because our brain makes us easily susceptible to all sorts of influences. Watching a violent movie predisposes us to act violently; even listening to violent rhetoric makes us more inclined to be violent.¹³ Anger is contagious, and self-control is the brake of restraint. When Paul lists the fruits of the Spirit in Galatian 5, he places *self-control* last because it enables and perfects all the others.¹⁴ Having control of myself because I am under the guidance of the Lord Jesus through his Spirit is the meaning of spirituality. I don't just react; I chose my responses based on my faith.

Pastor William White prays a simple prayer each day, "God, let me love what you love and hate what you hate."¹⁵ We've been taught all our lives that God is love; the problem with this is that it can easily degenerate into a kind of mushy tolerance that loses love's hard edge. Love can be highly intolerant and outright confrontive. Jesus was love incarnate, and he was both confrontive and intolerant. Read the Gospels. Love is not love if it forfeits the capacity to hate those forces that limit love and corrupt the beloved. Injustice, false teaching, and hypocrisy- especially in the church- ought to receive the full force of anger. Doctrine matters. Holy living matters. Sloppy teaching and sloppy living are not consistent with this grand faith. Henry Ward Beecher once wrote: "A man that does not know how to be angry does not know how to be good. A man that does not know how to be shaken to his heart's core with indignation over things evil is either a fungus or a wicked man."¹⁶ So if injustice or cruelty and falsehood appears before you, and you do not respond with

¹³ Larry Greenemeier, "What Causes Someone to Act on Violent Impulses and Commit Murder?" www.scientificamerican.com, (1-12-11).

¹⁴ Galatians 5:23.

¹⁵ *Fatal Attractions* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1992), 37.

¹⁶ Michael Green, editor, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 20.

anger and action, then beware: your soul may already have died, or become a fungus!

According to the authors of the 2010 book *America's Four Gods*, we differ widely on two key areas of belief about God: (1) the level of God's engagement in our world, and (2) the extent of God's judgment of evildoers. The question is this: Is God actively and meticulously engaged in what happens in your life and in this world? Or is God distant, remote, and uncaring? Secondly, does God judge wrongdoers in this life? Does God express wrath toward people and nations in this age? Or is God only kind, forgiving, and helpful to people in need? Based on the differences, our comrades fall into four clusters:

First is the *Authoritative God* who is very involved in the world to help people and does judge evildoers in this life. Even so, he is loving, and is seen as a Father. Thirty-one percent have this understanding.

Second is the *Benevolent God*- what I have come to mock as *The Great Mush God*. This God is very involved in this world to help people but does not feel anger toward evildoers and doesn't judge anyone- thus a modern therapeutic, indulgent deity. Twenty-four percent are here.

Third is the *Critical God*. This God is not involved in the affairs of our world, but he does take careful note of people and will judge them in the afterlife, holding them to account for evils done. Sixteen percent of Americans have this view. Nothing now, big surprises later on!

Fourth is the *Distant God*. This is more a cosmic force or Higher Power than a person. This God created but is no longer engaged with the world and does not judge its inhabitants. Twenty-four percent believe this, which leaves five percent as atheists. Concerning agnostics, the authors write: "We find that when pressed, individuals who first describe themselves as 'agnostic'- meaning that even if there is a God, we know very little about him- are actually believers in a Distant God."¹⁷

The Authoritative God, The Benevolent God, The Critical God, The Distant God: which do you follow? So let there be no mistake about it. The God of Jesus and of his faithful church across the ages is *The Authoritative God*, not a distant deity but a God involved in creation, a God not only of future but of present love and present wrath. Not the great mush God, not the God who now keeps moral score and

¹⁷ Summary of Paul Froese, Christopher Bader, *America's Four Gods* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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only acts later, and not distant deity who watches amusingly from far away with no investment. It is *The Authoritative God* who is confessed in our United Methodist *Confession of Faith*, and it reads, “We believe all... stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, *both now and in the last day*. We believe in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to endless condemnation.”¹⁸ This God is active- as the Article says- *both now and in the last day*.

This grand biblical vision makes no sense apart from *The Authoritative God*. The other three portraits are nothing but jokes, not worthy of worship or obedience, but they are very popular because they make no demands, at least not in this life. So live for the now and live as you please, which- when you add up the percentages is about two thirds of our culture. This is the great divide in America, and in the church: Just who is your God? And what does it imply about how you think and live? Most want nothing to do with *The Authoritative God* of Jesus and his faithful church because it implies love and judgment, now and later, which is why Julia Ward Howe could write on the verge of our great national calamity, “He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat; he is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgment seat; O be quick my soul to answer him; be jubilant my feet; our God is marching on.”¹⁹ An involved God of love and judgment: this is what our nation resists because it gets in the way of *making up your own rules and doing your own thing just so long as no one gets hurt, and why can't you just leave me alone!*

The one who embodied God's love showed righteous rage. Jesus hated sin and evil, what they had done to God's good world and all its peoples. He resisted injustice and stood up for the weak. He was not happy when he went looking for fruit and found only leaves- whether in fig trees, people, or in the temple of his nation.²⁰ He's after fruit, not foliage, and expects a return on investment.

The incident before us is most often labeled *The Cleansing Of The Temple*, but that is gross misunderstanding. Jesus did not *cleans*e anything; he stopped the whole operation for a short time as a warning that the entire system was under judgment. Forty years later the Roman took it down, but as of his speaking, it's a good as gone. So it was not a *cleansing*; it was an enacted parable of future judgment- a bit of

¹⁸ *The Book of Discipline 2012*, 704.

¹⁹ *U.M Hymnal*, No. 717, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” Stanza 3.

²⁰ See John 15:1-11 as a further commentary on Jesus the fruit inspector.

prophetic theater.²¹ This is the only time Jesus used the direct action of violence. It was not a card he played often, and it was effective because it was rare.

The Jerusalem temple was arranged in a series of concentric courtyards. There was the sanctuary, into which only the priests could go, and inside that the Holy of Holies which the high priest entered only once a year. Outside the sanctuary was the Court of Israel, into which all male Israelites could go to offer sacrifice to God. Then the court of the women. The outermost was the Court of the Gentiles, beyond which no Gentile male could go unless he was a full convert. The series of compounds was a statement of God's holiness and of human access. It was here in the outermost layer- the Court of the Gentiles- that stalls were set up for the purchase of ritually acceptable animals for sacrifice and for money to be changed into the temple coinage for the annual temple tax. This activity turned the Court of the Gentiles- which was the place of prayer for non-Jewish outsiders- into an oriental bazaar.

There's nothing wrong with the purchase of pigeons or sheep for sacrifices; it's part of Jewish sacrificial worship. They had to be certified. There's also no hint the exchanging Roman coins for temple coins without idolatrous images was dishonest. The system was of great assistance to pilgrims who couldn't bring animals with them.²² What is objectionable is that it turns the one place of prayer for Gentiles who are seeking the one true God into a livestock market and currency exchange. When running the shop blinds a church to its mission, something has to stop!

Jesus was offended that seekers were being treated so shabbily by the temple hierarchy because the true mission of Israel was to be *a light to the nations*. Judaism- and the Jesus who came through it- are *for the whole world*. But in a short time, all was back in place. Nothing changed. But a word of judgment had been delivered, and it was a good as gone.

²¹ Here I draw on Larry Hurtado, *Mark* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1983), 169; Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000) 118-127; Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2001), 149-153; M. Eugene Boring, *Mark* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2006), 317-325; Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (San Francisco, CA: Harper-One, 2006), 31-53; R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 372-384; Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 168-172).

²² Augustine Stock, *Call to Discipleship* (Wilmington, DL: Glazier, 1982), 165.

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When we forget that the church exists first for God, then for those who are not yet its members, are we not repeating the sin of servicing only insiders? A great question for any church to ask is this: What are the kinds of people who are unlikely to be reached by our church? and then to go after them! If it's only *people like us*- whatever *us* is- have we betrayed our mission and made ourselves vulnerable to Jesus' anger? Churches that do not make mission to outsiders a priority after worship have little reason to expect God's blessing. Jesus is even now shutting churches all across the land that have lost their mission, and many of them are ours! What he said of the temple applies to the church as well. "*My house*" is what he called it as if he owned it; "*my house* shall be called a house of prayer for *all nations, all the tribes.*" Here is meant Gentiles; now it means people around the edges of our lives: the poor, the unsophisticated, the tattooed, the addicted, the immoral, those with bad manners, broken families, new immigrants, and those with no Christian history. Jesus thinks such people are important, important enough the judge the temple if it misses them.

Mark's reports that Jesus entered the temple- likely on Monday of Holy Week, and there he went absolutely wild with a calculated public fit. He drove out those who sold and bought, overturned the table of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. But here is the kicker: verse 16, "and he would not allow *any one* to carry *anything* through the temple." At least for a little while, he and his followers shut the place down. It was one of the things that got him killed. Verse 18: "They sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him," writes Mark. When the place of prayer becomes a carnival, when visitors are not cared for as they seek God, then we as church are under the same judgment and face an angry Jesus with a whip in his hand because we are blocking the way to God.

I was too young to sit with blacks at lunch counters or protest the Vietnam War. And though I've participated in peaceful pro-life activities, I've never chained myself to a clinic door. We are such nice, decent people, but the example of Jesus raises a question. Is there any evil or injustice against which you would take direct action and risk the retaliation of powerful forces? Have we been so tamed by our comforts we would not ever take the risk no matter how horrible the injustice? It bothers me deeply when I ask new members what issues of social injustice their faith leads them to address, and they look at me with a blank stare as if it never crossed their mind that personal faith is to have public consequences. It is then that I know how deeply we've been coopted into thinking this faith is all about making us safe and happy and prosperous. What pushes your button? What kindles your anger? Is it drugs? Violence? Financial laws that pushed us to the edge of a new depression? Environmental degradation? Conspicuous consumption? Teen pregnancy? Racism?

Hunger? The coarsening of male-female relationships through ubiquitous pornography. Sexual trafficking? Homelessness? Abortion? No-fault divorce that often disadvantages women? What is it? Could that anger be a call from God to do something? Our churches are dying of comfort while sitting on padded pews and complaining if the service goes over an hour. *What are you mad about?* Are you doing anything that requires faith to engage real issues through serious study and direct action? Have you ever shared your faith in Jesus with anyone?

At times I wonder, What's ahead for our country if the gap between rich and poor continues to grow and more and more wealth is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands?²³ It is corrupting our political process through Super-Pacs of the right and left. What is ahead if our culture continues to get raunchier and raunchier, all in the name of freedom of individual self-expression?²⁴ How long can we continue to kill the unborn before God lets us have what we want, a culture where responsibility is out, convenience rules, and where no old person is safe if they are not immediately useful, as is already happening in Europe? What's ahead for the United Methodist Church if we abandon our faith and ethics and follow the way of others who are undermining the faith and codes of conduct we have received?²⁵ Being a smiling chaplain to an self-indulgent culture is not what I signed up for. Jesus stood over against the fantasies and lies of this world, and we are to do the same. A verse in an old hymn nails it, "Are there no foes for me to face? Must I not stem the flood? Is this vile world a friend to grace, to lead me on to God?"²⁶ No, it is not. Christian social activism and vital witness will take a leap forward when good but complacent church folk get mad enough to leave their zones of comfort to work together to name a problem and make a difference.

The second reason for Jesus' action is harder to translate. The word translated

²³ See the collection of essays edited by John Edwards, Marion Crain & Arne Kalleberg, *Ending Poverty in America: How To Restore The American Dream* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2007). I recently heard that the 400 wealthiest U.S. families have more assets than the bottom 50% of the nation; can this continue?

²⁴ T. Susan Eller, "The Rise of Raunch," *Today's Christian Woman*, www.christianitytoday.com/tcw/2007/sep/oct/3.28.

²⁵ For a defense of our doctrine, discipline, and mission, see Bishop Scott Jones, "Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace," *Good News*, March/April 2014, 20-23.

²⁶ *U.M. Hymnal*, "Am I a Soldier of the Cross," No. 511.

robbers has more than one nuance. One is *thief*; another is more overtly political. The two men on either side of Jesus the next Friday afternoon were not on crosses for larceny. They were *lestai* in Greek, sometimes translated *robbers*, but a better meaning is *insurrectionists*²⁷ or, as we might say, *one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter*. To some Jews they were tragic national heroes, the latest in a long line who took justice into their own hands through guerilla resistance against the occupying powers; to the Romans they were terrorists to be dealt with as such. String up enough of them and maybe the home folks will get the message. So for Jesus to say that the temple had become a *den-* or hiding place- of *lestai*, was to say that the violent nationalistic party within Judaism, the Zealots, had made the temple their chief symbol.

It was not a place of prayer; it stood as the image of the longing to bring God's kingdom by force of arms, which was just the opposite of Jesus' vision of how the kingdom comes. The Temple was now judged, and those who had taken it as symbol of their violent cause along with it. Verse 13, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations" (That's charge No. 1: a quote from Isaiah about forgetting the mission), "but you have made it a hiding place of violent revolutionaries" (That's Charge No. 2: a quote from Jeremiah about the misreading of God's kingdom). And so it was that forty years later the Roman General Titus put up siege works, killed the freedom fighters in mass executions, burned and tore down the temple block by block, and all the while the church was reaching out to welcome Gentiles and teaching them to pray, "Thy kingdom come." Because of Jesus the temple is now *passe*, and because of its nationalistic associations, it was doomed. To tear down a temple in the ancient world was to in effect declare its god to be null and void; but not this God. The divine residence had shifted from Jerusalem temple to Jesus long before the Romans arrived. He is now the center of divine activity; the place of worship and sacrifice is not a building but a person.

Oh, and the strange story about the fig tree; I know you want to hear about that. Was Jesus ticked off because he was hungry? Is this an example of unrighteous anger? No. The fig tree was a perfect symbol for an Israel that was all leaf and no produce. By wrapping the temple tantrum in the story of the fig tree and by stating explicitly that *it was not the season for figs*, Mark invites a symbolic reading. What Jesus did to the fig tree is precisely what he did to the temple, and just as surely as the fig tree withered to the root the next morning, so would the temple eventually be as

²⁷ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two*, Louisville, KY: WJK, 2004), 72.

Mark 11:12-25, Ephesians 4:24-27 16

well. Jesus did not *cleanse* the temple; he did not *rehabilitate it*; he *cursed* it, then left it to wither and finally crumble without the divine presence which was now embodied in himself. Churches that forget the mission can meet the same fate.

On the one hand we are commanded to be angry. "Be angry," wrote Paul in Ephesians 5:26. And when I meet a wife or husband who is not angry because their spouse is involved in porn, in addictions, in adultery, or in secret spending and lying, we have a problem, because if there is no anger at the loss and the threat to the family and the denial of vows, nothing's going to change. Someone had better get hurt, get angry, get help, get smart and get busy with the hard realities of confrontation and real consequences.

But the command to be angry is not a license for rage because following it are three warnings, "Be angry, 1) but do not sin; 2) do not let the sun go down on your anger, and 3) give no opportunity to the devil." Anger held too long can become bitterness and revenge, two of the devil's favorite entry points. Don't let that happen. Don't let the power gift of anger become the deadly sin of rage.

But there is another sin here, and that is not to get angry when anger is called for, to wink at injustice, to walk by pain, to allow dangerous half-truths to go unchallenged in the domestic and in the church and in the public spheres. We are commanded to be angry. So do not live by anger, but do not live without it either. It's not your first card, even your best, but don't leave it out of your deck. It is a ally in the search for truth and justice. A church without the capacity for anger and wise, courageous action is no longer good. Following Jesus is never safe.
