

Getting angry

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday in Lent, March 8, 2015.

“Making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle...He told those who were selling doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”
John 2:15-16

When I was a senior in college, I was applying to enter the ordination process and one of the requirements was to be interviewed by a psychologist and a psychiatrist. I guess the bishop either wanted to know if I crazy enough to want to be a priest or just crazy. One question the psychologist asked me was to recall an occasion when I got angry. I told him about the time when I was warden of the Canterbury House, the Episcopal Church’s center for students to gather that was located just off the campus. It was then a dry campus in a dry county and there were strict rules about no alcohol on campus. I told him how I once came in to the Canterbury House to find a student distributing beer out of the refrigerator. Realizing that it could have gotten us into trouble with the college officials, I angrily took all the beer and threw it out and told him to get out as well. I later learned that he was a troubled youth and went to him and explained my concern that caused me to be so angry and apologized. In hearing the story, the psychologist asked me if I felt like Jesus in the story of how he threw out the moneychangers in the temple. I hadn’t thought about it, but it seemed like a good parallel.

In this story, Jesus sees that the temple has become a place of commerce. With eyes flashing, he overturns the tables of the moneychangers, spilling everything on the floor. Taking a whip, he drives the merchants and their animals out of the temple telling them that they are violating that sacred space by turning it into a marketplace.

The merchants felt they had a perfect right to be there. After all, having moneychangers in the temple was a service to travelers from foreign lands that needed to exchange their currency for use in the temple. The merchants also provided animals to be used as sacrificial offerings and if you needed a shawl, a cushion, religious literature, beads or a souvenir, they were there to provide them. No one seemed to think there was anything wrong with that except Jesus who was angry that the temple as a house of prayer had been turned into a den of thieves.

What we see here is a rare view of Jesus being angry. What does this do to our image of a gentle and compassionate Jesus? And what does this tell us as about our own anger and how we manage it? To understand his anger, we need to understand that Jesus is reacting to the desecration of the sacred space in the temple.

Jesus saw that the merchants have no reverence or respect for the place and their abhorrent practice of animal sacrifice made the temple a slaughterhouse. At the heart of Jesus’ teaching is that animal sacrifices can never be a substitute for getting us into a right relationship with God. Better a penitent heart than a slaughtered animal.

In the life of the church today, it is important to be aware of how easily we can stray from our core purpose and mission. We must never forget who we are and what we are called to do as God’ people. We must avoid being too preoccupied with the externals of fund raising and socializing and inconsequential matters that sap our energy. Being overly concerned with such matters drives visitors and newcomers right back out the door.

What about our own anger? Are we ever justified in getting angry? Anger in itself is not wrong. There are times when we all need to get in touch with our anger but when it causes us to regret what we say or do, it only has a negative effect. We have to find a healthy outlet for our anger. When anger gets out of control, we run the risk of hurting others and damaging our relationships with them. Losing control of our temper is like losing control of our vehicle on a highway. It can have serious and deadly consequences.

We all respond to anger in different ways. Some get angry and have little or no regard for the feelings of others. Others are reluctant to deal with their anger and stifle it out of fear of what they might say. We don’t always know what will set us off. Whether we have a short fuse or a long fuse, when we become upset our anger must be channeled in a constructive way. It is essen-

tial for us to know how to react when our buttons are pushed. Even if we feel we have been treated unjustly, the best response to a negative action is with a positive reaction.

All too often we read and hear accounts in the news of violence by terrorists using religion to justify their violence that causes death and destruction. Out of control anger causes senseless random violence toward victims they don't even know.

We may think we have never violated the commandment against murder, but emotional murder is committed through cruel and abusive treatment that destroys a person's self-esteem and confidence. Spreading malicious gossip about others murders their good name and reputation.

Depending on the circumstances, anger can be used for good. If it were not for the anger of Martin Luther over the abuses in the 16th century church, there would have been no Protestant Reformation. If it hadn't been for the anger of the abolitionists in the mid 19th century who believed slavery to be morally wrong, racial barriers would never have come down. The massive response fifty years ago in Selma, Alabama was a high point in the fight against racism. Were it not for the suffrage movement begun in the mid-19th century, women, African Americans and Native Americans would never have gotten the vote. It should never have taken so long to expose the hidden horror of battered wives, rape victims and abuse of children. The irony is that those who confronted these instances of injustice and violence were thought of radical troublemakers. What once was thought to be radical idea has in time become accepted and necessary. We can be grateful that those brave souls who did not compromise themselves in standing against violence and injustice.

It is not the anger itself that is wrong, but the inappropriate expression of it that has negative consequences. Better to channel our anger into being an agent for correcting an injustice. So, if you find yourself getting angry over an important issue, do something positive to correct it.

And if you think, "Why me?" ask yourself, "Why not?"