

## The Anger of Christ

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“He looked around at them with anger. . . .” -- Mark 3:5a

I saw a headline in the paper the other day that said Republicans might have good chance of becoming the majority in the Senate because the country is in a foul mood. Everyone, it seems, is mad about something.

The American people are mad at both parties in Congress who can't seem to come out of their ideological trenches long enough to do some actually governing. People who are concerned about the proliferation of hand guns are angry at the power of the gun lobby. People who care about the environment are angry that we as a nation are such foot-draggers when it comes to real environmental stewardship. People who care about genuine education for all our children are angry that a new generation has re-segregated our schools through property taxes, consigning black and Latino children to shoddy schools because of the communities those children live in. And all of us are angry at the power terrorist groups have to keep all of us frightened and embroiled in perpetual conflict.

There is no shortage of reasons to be angry, and I think many of us are. One of you asked me back in the summer to preach about anger, and it's hard to imagine a more timely topic. The anger that erupted in Ferguson, Missouri, should be telling people with eyes to see and ears to hear that large segments of our population are angry, and anger, as we all know, has the power to destroy.

The writers of the Bible knew this, and the Bible speaks about anger repeatedly, especially in the books that emphasize the role of wisdom in a faithful life. Proverbs 14:29, for example, says, “Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly.” And later in that book, at 22:24, the writer warns us, “Make no friends with those given to anger, and do not associate with hotheads.” And in Ecclesiasticus, one of the books of the Apocrypha, we read this about anger, “Jealousy and anger shorten life, and anxiety brings on premature old age” (30:24).

The Bible takes anger seriously because it recognizes several important facts about this pervasive human emotion.

First, the bible recognizes that people will get angry, not just once, but regularly. Throughout our lives we'll find ourselves getting angry about things. The elderly father of one of my neighbors is angry with his daughter right now because the BMV refused to renew his driver's license, and it was his daughter who insisted that he go to get tested. His daughter could see that his eyesight and reflexes were no longer able to keep him and other people safe when he got behind the wheel of a car. It obviously wasn't his daughter's fault that the BMV failed the old man, but anger makes us lash out and hurt people who've done us no harm.

Isn't that the ghastly dynamic behind the beheadings of western journalists we're being subjected to right now? A terrorist group kills innocent people from the west to retaliate against our killing innocent people in air strikes. We call killing innocent people collateral damage, ignoring the sense of outrage that such damage unleashes. No matter how systematic our planning or precise our weapons, war is always an expression of

anger, and unfocused anger always brings harm to the one who is angry.

So when we read in Mark's Gospel that Jesus looked at his religious opponents with anger, our knowledge of being angry ourselves should make us wonder what Mark was trying to tell us about Jesus, since Mark could easily have left that detail out of the story. Mark says that it was the hard-heartedness of those who should have known better that made Jesus angry. A man's withered hand needed healing, but it was the Sabbath, and doctoring was prohibited on the Sabbath. The man's hand had been withered for decades and he had learned to cope with his disability; would waiting one more day to heal him have made much of a difference?

That was the position of Jesus's opponents, and it made sense to a lot of people. But both Jesus and his opponents knew that the Jewish law concerning the Sabbath made allowance for such things as rescuing a farm animal that had fallen into a ditch and was in danger of dying; could that kind of exception not be extended to healing a man with a withered hand? Apparently not, and Jesus saw this not as fidelity to the law, but as hard-heartedness, and it made him angry.

He was angry not because of some wrong that had been done to him, but rather because of those who got in the way of the right thing being done for someone who needed it. That's what made Jesus angry, and that's what made his anger righteous.

In his magnificent short story called "A Christmas Memory," Truman Capote puts these words in the mouth of his unnamed female protagonist: "It's bad enough in life to do without something you want; but confound it, what gets my goat is not being able to give somebody something you want them to have."

That's righteous anger, the anger we see in the Christ in Mark's Gospel: not having been personally wronged, but seeing that the right has been withheld from another.

That's the second kind of anger the Bible recognizes, and it's the kind of anger that turns people into activists for justice and peace. When we see images on the nightly news of hungry children, most of us sense pity for those children, and we should. But those children deserve more than our pity; they deserve our anger, our sense of outrage that we have put together an economic system that allows a tiny few to have so much while depriving so many of the simple basics, like food, shelter, clothing, medicine, and education.

There's nothing necessary about the economic system you and I live with; economic systems do not occur in nature. We humans build them, and we build them in certain ways and not in others, and the way we've built ours makes it generate a lot of wealth for a few, but not much wealth for the rest, and despite all our hand-wringing over the plight of the destitute, we steadfastly refuse to do more than tinker with the system that produces such disparities. And we have no excuse for having hungry children in the richest country on earth except our own hard-heartedness.

Pastor Jeremiah Wright brought the self-righteous wrath of who knows how many Christian Americans down on his head when he said that the "God bless America" that comes so quickly to the lips of the piously patriotic helps us ignore the outrageous sins of our own country, for which God should not bless us but rather damn us. No one except those who have been shut out of the American way of life by their fellow Americans, generation after generation, appreciated Wright's anger. But it was righteous anger, calling for justice not for Jeremiah Wright, but rather for those for whom he spoke. That's the anger of Christ.

I hope, friends, that you'll get angry when you leave this place later this morning. Not angry with your kids or your spouse or your boss or those idiot other drivers, but angry instead with the cruelties and injustices we, through our acceptance of the status

quo, tolerate and perpetuate. I hope you'll experience not simply the peace of Christ in your life, but also the anger of Christ, and that it leads you to take action on behalf of those who need our help. If the peace of Christ can keep our hearts, then let us pray that the anger of Christ can move them – for our sake, for the world's sake, and for his.