Making a Whip of Cords

March 19, 2006 (Lent 3 B)

Exodus 20:1-17 Romans 7:13-25 John 2:13-22

In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple

The folks in Jesus' community certainly 'did' anger. They argued and fought and insulted each other; the gospels are full of insults and snappy retorts. And Jesus was not alone in criticizing the Temple – many Jewish communities in his time felt that the temple was more a 'den of robbers' than a house of God, and some Jews boycotted Temple rituals. The money changing system was always a point of contention. You couldn't use Roman coins to buy animals to be slaughtered – those coins had graven images, of the emperor;
you had to exchange them for other coins – not unlike going to an amusement park and buying tokens to use in arcade games And ever since there was a Temple, prophets have been preaching, shouting, demonstrating at the entrance to the temple, doing all sorts of strange things.

So, few people would have been surprised at Jesus' anger. Anger was culturally accepted, and no one in Jesus' time was saddled with a childhood of pictures of Jesus as not only blond, blue-eyed, but always looking up to heaven with a somewhat dopey, passive expression. Jesus' anger would have been noticed, but not shocking – these were people living in violent times.

Three weeks in a row we have listened to violent readings: God promising not to repeat the flood that destroyed all but an ark-full of people and creatures; Abraham almost killing his son; Jesus calling his friend Peter "Satan", then asking his followers to let themselves be executed. Now today, Jesus stands with a whip in his hand, furiously driving animals out of the temple courtyard, overturning tables, scattering coins and doves and worshipers, consumed with a fiery zeal. It's not the Jesus we normally depict in stained glass windows, plaiting together scraps of rope in order to make a whip.

There is a key text of justice here, a parable of the passionate, prophetic drive to make real God's call to justice, to respond with fervor against corruption, exploitation, anything that comes between God, anything that favors the rich over the poor, the strong over the weak. But if you have grown up with violence it is hard to move from the Gospel scene to the message of justice, because it is scary to have Jesus act this way. It isn't safe.

Preaching about prophetic zeal cannot pretend that there isn't an abuse of anger in families, communities and in churches. I grew up in a household that was no stranger to verbal and physical violence. The youngest child, my response was to hide from the fights, and then release that anger at school –getting into fights myself, or simply going into my cubbyhole and yelling as loud as I could. There was no such thing as good anger, healthy anger. For me, any anger was a warning whistle that violence was coming around the corner. And my response was a response I share with many people – I learned to shut down anger all together, to block off that emotion, dam up the channel that anger coursed through.

It frightens me to envision Jesus as angry. But it is also a holy challenge: If Jesus was not only fully God but also fully human, what does it mean to me that Jesus was angry? I believe it is a challenge to recognize anger as part of being human.

The arcane and sometimes beautiful book of Revelation, written by a different John, John of Patmos, has a wonderful passage about what can happen to a church that has neither anger nor love. John of Patmos writes, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth."

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Whosoever, an online magazine for GLBT Christians, put together, tongue in cheek, a hymnal for that Lukewarm church, with hymns such as:

* A Comfy Mattress Is Our God
* Sit Up, Sit Up for Jesus
* Lift Every Voice and Intellectualize
* What an Acquaintance We Have in Jesus
* Take My Life and Let Me Be[1]

Oh, but there is such comfort in that kind of faith, a faith that is lukewarm, that does not lift up before God our more passionate and difficult emotions. It does not have the frightening image of Jesus with the whip! It does not have uncomfortable prayers!

Here's an uncomfortable prayer for you: A neighbor of ours from the last century, Vida Scudder – a professor at Wellesley, a member of St. Stephens in the South End, a life long Episcopalian, crafted this grace before meals: "We have food. Others have none. God bless the revolution."

The revolution that Scudder means, of course, is the revolution of God, the coming of God's kingdom – not a revolution of Democrats or Republicans, but God's revolution, God's commonwealth, God's kingdom. It is the revolution we heard Isaiah speak of in Scripture on Ash Wednesday:

to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke….
To share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house.

But to see that revolution, that coming of God's kingdom, we need to be set free from fear, free even from the fear of anger. Not foolishly, not imagining that there is no abuse, no violence, no manipulation and self-serving aggression. Not inappropriately, losing our temper with friends, channeling frustration or stress into bitter words and hurtful actions.

But honestly, recognizing that there are things to be angry *about*, that there is hunger and violence and poverty in this world which is avoidable, solvable; hunger and violence and poverty in our communities; hunger and violence and poverty whose presence we too easily accept, injustice we too readily make room for. There is something thing to be angry about, not with anger that is self-serving, not with anger that makes us blind, or violent, but with anger that makes us call out to God.

Good poetry, good prayers, good psalms make use of our whole emotional range. They bring before God not only joy and sorrow and thanksgiving, but more difficult emotions such as anger. What would it be like this week to knot a whip of cords in our prayers, to lift up before God our anger alongside our thanksgivings and intercessions? To tell God – I am angry. I am angry about what I hear on the news; I am angry about what happened at work on Tuesday; I am angry about they guy that cut me off on the Mass Pike; I am angry that some people in this city have to choose between rent and food.

Try it for a week and see what God does with that anger. Perhaps after a few days, it might feel like Spring cleaning; handing that anger over to God just might start to drive out old angers and fears cluttered in our hearts like moneychangers and cattlemen in the temple courtyard.

[1] http://www.whosoever.org/v4i3/hymns.html

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