

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

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Mark 11:12–26

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in you will discover peace; through Christ our Lord, Amen.

The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard him say it.

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!”

“Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. “Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

This is such a weird passage. Jesus doesn't seem much like Jesus in this story. We are told he is hungry and as he walks upon fig tree it does not have any fruit, which makes sense because it is not the season for the tree to have fruit. But Jesus doesn't seem to care, and he curses it. If this were a modern story, this is where one of the disciples would pull out a candy bar and say, “Here, have a Snickers.” Then Jesus wouldn't be hangry (hungry and angry at the same time) and the fig tree would be fine. Instead, hangry Jesus curses the fig tree. And the story tells us that the disciples heard him say it. As I have said before, it is difficult to know the tone in a story that you are reading, but it's hard for me not to hear the surprise of the disciples overhearing Jesus curse the tree that is out of season. It's not the tree's fault it doesn't have any fruit! It isn't supposed to at this time of year, so Jesus curses it, and the disciples heard it!!!!

After Jesus is mean to the tree, the disciples and Jesus make it to the temple, and the situation doesn't improve. Jesus begins to drive out those who are doing business in the temple. Jesus starts to flip some tables. He upsets the religious authorities, and they begin to plot how to

get rid of Jesus. He's upsetting the status quo. He's disrupting the way things are done.

Later, when Jesus and the disciples pass by the fig tree, Peter notices it and declares that the tree that Jesus cursed has withered. Jesus then gives some instruction to the disciples about prayer, belief, and forgiveness. Like I said, weird.

The story of the fig tree and Jesus driving people from the temple and flipping tables are in other books of the bible as well, but it is only in the Gospel of Mark, our reading from today, where they are paired together.

Interpreters say because of the pairing, the two become related and the tree without fruit becomes a metaphor for the worshiping community, and more specifically, the religious leaders. When Jesus discusses what is happening at the temple and uses the phrase "a house of prayer for all the nations," and a "den of robbers," Jesus is quoting from the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. He is denouncing religious practices that cover up sinful behavior, attacking the use of a place of prayer for commercial practices, and condemning religious exclusion.ⁱⁱ He is calling out injustice. He is calling out the lack of fruit that is evident for so-called religious people. Jesus is upset that people's words don't match their actions. He has holy rage.

Author Cole Arthur Riley, in her book "This Here Flesh," talks about the story of Jesus and the fig tree. She writes, "This anger once seemed strange and unnecessary to me. I don't think the story makes much sense alienated from its sequel; when Christ goes tearing through the temple, flipping tables. He confronts those meant to be bearers of belonging in the world and calls out the culture of exclusivity and exploitation they're perpetuating instead. It all made sense when I learned that fig tree was the private preface to the very public force of anger in the temple. A place to encounter the divine has become a place of scarcity, emptied of

the most vulnerable. And in the face of injustice and exclusion, we meet a God of holy, premeditated, bodily, unapologetic rage.”

Jesus remembers his religious training and instruction. He remembers the stories about his faith that is meant to be a blessing for everyone. He remembers the call of the prophets to care for those who need it most, the marginalized, the poor, the widow, and the orphan. He does not witness faithful, fruitful actions at the temple. Jesus has a righteous anger. The author Karen Armstrong talks about anger, and says, “With remarkable consistency the prophets, who depict God’s anger in painfully vivid ways, allow us to see anger as a proper response to human injustice, the terrible wrongs we inflict on others, especially on those least able to defend themselves.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Several years ago, I attended a training sponsored by the Industrial Areas Foundation called Organizing 101. The goal of the training was to provide some basic frameworks for understanding the task of community organizing, and how churches might be involved in the work of organizing with other faith communities in order to work toward the common good. There are many organizations across the country who use faith-based community organizing to improve their communities. Here in the Twin Cities, one such organization is called ISAI AH. Some of us from Oak Grove have been involved in some of the efforts of this organization. ISAI AH’s goal is to harness the power of faith communities to build a just and abundant Minnesota through faith in action. ISAI AH, through its member faith communities, has worked on initiatives for paid family and medical leave, clean energy legislation, voting rights, and anti-racism efforts.

During the training I had a few years back, one of the facilitators talked about anger. Specifically, he talked about anger as a necessary characteristic in leadership in organizing. While most of the characteristics could be taught, he said, anger was not one of those characteristics. Anger was something that had to be already present. But this was not just anger in general, he made a distinction between hot anger and cold anger. Hot anger is explosive anger. Violent anger. I think it is what most of us think of when we hear the word anger. But there is also what he called cold anger. Cold anger is not explosive and comes from a different place, typically from grief or loss. It is a reflective anger. To illustrate this, the facilitator talked about Moses.

Moses, you will recall, was an Israelite brought up in the home of Pharaoh. Pharaoh had ordered all Hebrew baby boys be put to death because he was worried that there were too many Jews and that one day they would rise up and defeat him. Hearing this, Moses's mother put him in a basket and sent him down the river, hoping he might be saved. He was found by Pharaoh's daughter and was raised as an Egyptian in the palace. After Moses had grown up, the story tells us, he had seen the suffering of forced labor and slavery of the Hebrews. His own people. One day he saw a Hebrew being beaten by an Egyptian and got so angry that he killed the Egyptian. When he learned that Pharaoh knew and was after him, Moses fled. The moment that Moses got angry and killed the Egyptian is hot anger. Moses was angry and he lashed out and caused grievous harm to another person. It was uncontrollable anger and shows up in an unexpected and harmful way.

Later in the story, after Moses has resettled and gotten married, he is tending sheep on the mountain, when a messenger of God appears to him in the form of a burning bush. The story tells us that the bush was burning but that it was not consumed. It is in this encounter that God calls Moses to go back to Egypt to speak with Pharaoh on behalf of God

to free the Israelites. The burning bush is the metaphor for cold anger. You are on fire, but you are not consumed, it does not move into being out of control or explosive, it is not a hot anger but a cool anger that can become strategic. It is an anger that is rooted in the past, rooted in the memory of oppression and humiliation. Moses goes back to Egypt and with the memory of his people's suffering, with the memory of babies senselessly slaughtered, and people forced into slavery, he goes back, and he is strategic. He remembers the past hurt and he is willing to act on it in such a way that a future hope may be realized. Anger can serve a purpose. Anger does serve a purpose when it is channeled in strategic ways into action.

Now I want to be a little cautious here, and I want to make sure you don't misunderstand cold anger for a version of being "nice." Many of us may have been raised with the idea to be a good Christian also meant that you were nice and polite. After all, as Presbyterians, we like to be decent and in order. But on a serious note, anger is sometimes demonized or used against those in marginalized positions, like LGBTQ folks, women, or people of color, by those in power to help prop up the status quo and not allow dissent to be heard. Again, Cole Arthur Riley notes, "We are told that the pinnacle of piety is *niceness*, and we are shamed out of conflict, protest, advocacy. We can cry but not too loud, our agony never allowed to disrupt the illusion of unity. I like that God doesn't play or talk nice to the hands of injustice. What freedom it is to witness a God whose primary concern is not for how [God] makes the oppressor feel, but for feeling alongside the oppressed, and telling the truth about it. For so long, Black people, noosed and muzzled, have not been permitted the liberty to tell the truth about the evil we've endured. And now, the language of niceness – and more recently, *civility* – serves to muzzle us further."^{iv}

Conflict is uncomfortable. Without fail, when an injustice is named, when change is demanded, those that are in a position of power and privilege, those that benefit the most by the existing injustice will be uncomfortable. And as people of faith, we must be more upset by the injustice than by the fact that some people may be uncomfortable. We don't stop being angry because someone is uncomfortable. But we do work to channel our anger in constructive ways.

Strategic anger is useful. Philosopher Myisha Cherry talks about different kinds of anger, different kinds of rage.^v One type is a narcissistic rage where a person is only angry that they are the victim of injustice. That type of rage doesn't aim for transformation. Another is what she calls "rogue rage," which is more a vengeance where something isn't right, and people just want to lash back at something. It also doesn't deal with transformation. She highlights a third rage, however, that is centered in recognizing that one may be the victim of injustice, but it is also concerned with how anyone could be a victim of injustice. It's a more inclusive kind of anger. If you see someone struggling, or being a victim of injustice, that's the rage you feel. It works to change the structures and systems that cause injustice. It's not trying to humiliate or defeat people; it is focused on transformation. Audre Lorde talked about harnessing anger as a tool, and that anger that is transformed into action, "is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification."

Even mild-mannered Fred Rogers talked about this when he said, "Confronting our feelings and giving them appropriate expression always takes strength, not weakness. It takes strength to acknowledge our anger, and sometimes more strength yet, to curb the aggressive urges anger may bring and to channel them into nonviolent outlets."^{vi}

It is a sign of strength to be angry in the face of injustice. It is the call of the church. It is following in the footsteps of the prophets and of Jesus. South African theologian Alan Boesak talks about rage as “a holy anger about things that are wrong with the world.” He preaches that this is the call of the church, “To rage against the ravaging of God’s earth and the destruction of God’s world. To rage when little children must die of hunger while the tables of the rich are sagging with food. To rage at the senseless killing of so many and against the madness of militarism. To rage at the lie that calls the threat of death and the strategy of destruction ‘peace.’ To rage against the complacency of so many in the church who fail to see that we shall live only by the truth, and that our fear will be the death of us all...To restlessly seek that restlessness which will challenge and seek to change human history until it conforms to the norms of the kingdom of God.”^{vii}

He names a number of things that deserve our holy rage. And I know we can add to the list. There are a seemingly unending number of injustices that are worthy of our rage and our action.

There is poverty and the ever-widening disparity in income and wealth between those that have and those that do not have.

There is hunger and a lack of clean water. Whether it is the injustice of massive hunger and lack of clean water in developing worlds, or the injustice that many thousands live in food deserts in our cities without access to healthy foods, or the fact that in one of the richest nations in the world, there are still children in this country who go to sleep hungry.

There is gender inequality, from women not being paid equal amounts for the same work, to women facing a culture of rape and abuse.

There is hatred because of one’s sexual orientation or gender identification.

There is the consequences of the climate crises

There is the lack of affordable education.

There is the lack of affordable healthcare for all people.

There is the lack of mental health services for all people.

There is the abuse and neglect of children.

There is...

There is...

There is...

Plenty to be angry about.

The question is not whether we should be angry. The question is what do we do with that anger to build one another up in love? How will our cold anger continue to fuel us into action for a more just and equitable world? Friends, have a Snickers and let's keep doing the work. Amen.

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Cole Arthur Riley, "This Here Flesh." Page 109.

ⁱⁱ Lamar Williamson, "Mark: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching." Pages 206-207.

ⁱⁱⁱ Karen Armstrong, "Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith." Page 124

^{iv} Cole Arthur Riley, *ibid*, page 110.

^v Myisha Cherry, "The Case for Rage: Why Anger is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle." See also this article <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/q-and-a/a-philosophers-defense-of-anger>

^{vi} Fred Rogers, "The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember."

^{vii} ^{vii} From "The Reuben Option," by Alan Boesak" in *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today's Preachers*. 132-138