

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush, March 8, 2009**

**John 2:13-22**

***Journey to the Cross – The Irony of It All***

Something was not right. You could sense it. In your gut. In your spirit. Something had to be done. This couldn't continue to happen. Not here. It was enough to make you angry – really angry. “Create a scene and kick over a few tables” kind of angry. There would be consequences, but for now, those didn't matter. Something must be done.

It's hard to put a name on this emotion. Some call it “righteous anger”, a zeal that consumes you. It is different from run-of-the-mill anger that happens when something annoys you – when someone cuts you off in traffic or you learn that you're the subject of unflattering gossip. Those are times when you feel irritated and perturbed, but righteous anger goes much deeper. Maybe it is something in our genes – an evolutionary zeal that emerges when something threatens the health and survival of our human species. Or maybe it comes from our spiritual core. Perhaps a bit of the old prophets' blood still flows through our veins and comes to a boil in the face of real injustice. Micah saying once more, *“God has told you, O mortal, what is good: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”* Amos crying out, *“God will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings; let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”*

Real prophetic anger usually comes up around big issues. Like when apartheid was the law of the land in South Africa and people called for sanctions to force change in that country. Or when the atrocities in Darfur led an International Court to file charges against the president of Sudan, as people the world over insist that the only moral response to genocide is the angry cry “Never again.” There's the story about a teacher who asked her class if she thought there would be a nuclear war in their lifetime. Every child said “Yes” except for one young man. His reason? He said, “Because my parents are out there every day making sure it doesn't happen.”

But here's the rub. It is one thing to feel righteous anger when the issue is clear, when the choice is black and white, right vs. wrong, good vs. evil. What happens, though, when the object of your righteous anger is the very thing that should have prevented the abuse and injustice in the first place? That's when the irony of it all is most keenly felt. What happens when the temple to worship God becomes a marketplace of corruption? What happens when the church called to offer good news to the poor instead becomes the chaplain to the rich who oppress? What happens when houses of faith become shelters of clergy sexual abuse, or when the gospel of inclusivity becomes distorted into a message of condemnation for the GLBT community? Or move beyond the church and temple: What happens when police become lawbreakers, when judges are bought, when military peacekeepers become torturers, or when democratic elections are stolen? Where do we turn then?

Isn't this a big part of the anxiety we now feel over the current economic crisis? The people whose advice we followed are now shrugging their shoulders helplessly as life

savings disappear and various types of Ponzi schemes collapse all around us. Many of the banks and financial institutions we trusted are folding or teetering on the brink of bankruptcy due to their own faults or the fatal flaws of their colleagues. All of this can cause us to question the foundation upon which our society is built. Where is the solid rock upon which we can stand, since so much around us is only shifting sand?

What happens when the thing to be reformed is the very thing we had long trusted and considered the foundation for what is right in this world? The gospel story presents us with this ironic dilemma. The temple was the house of God, but Jesus, the Son of God, had to cleanse and chastise that very house. Jesus cleansed the temple, but in time the power of the temple itself would turn against Jesus. The whip of cords he used to chase out the animals will in time be used against him, when he was scourged before being taken away to be crucified outside the city walls as a terrorist and trouble-maker. What do we do when we wield the whip of change, and end up having the whip or a water hose or a search warrant used against us? What do we do? Do we give up? Do we abandon our principles and sink into cynicism and despair? No, as Paul Harvey used to say, it is then that we need to tell the rest of the story.

If something is not right, if you can truly sense it and feel moved to act against it, then there is a place for righteous anger. As Joan Chittister wisely said, “Anger is not always bad. Anger can be a positive thing, the thing that moves us beyond the acceptance of evil.” Or as John Chrysostom, the 4<sup>th</sup> century preacher depicted here on the pulpit, once said, “Whoever is not angry when there is cause for anger, sins.” A living, prophetic faith always pushes against the boundaries of how things are done now, to challenge whatever is unjust, abusive, and just plain wrong. A living faith does this with zeal, with a threefold, righteous anger that “keeps on keeping on” no matter what.

First: Our faith calls us to proclaim a truth that is bigger than all the world’s truths. Jesus entered the temple grounds and saw people selling cattle for pure sacrificial offerings, and exchanging the tainted money of the world for the pure money acceptable in the Lord’s house. But Jesus challenged that perception. He insisted that the Lord’s house is about more than purity codes, deciding who is in and who is out, which coins are proper and which ones are unacceptable. It is the Father’s house – a place where the eternal, loving, righteous God chooses to dwell. Faith is about God, not about secondary issues like purity laws, or about sacrificial animals or bargaining for a better exchange rate from the money-changers in the courtyard. The same challenge still exists for us within these walls: Do we gather to worship and serve the living God, or to commune with one another and serve our own needs in pleasant surroundings of our own creation? Are our bodies temples of the Lord or have we let them become cluttered and disheveled by addictions and compulsions, prejudices and laziness that distort the image of God in which we’ve all been created? Those are important, cleansing questions.

Second: Our faith calls us to proclaim a truth that is more precious than anything else in this world. As we’ve come to learn, truth is not found in bank statements or financial quarterly reports. Truth is not reported by Mr. Dow Jones or Ms. Television Commentator. The miracle in John 2 that precedes the story of the cleansing of the

temple was when Jesus was at the wedding in Cana and took six stone jars of water and turned them into gallons of fine wine. A wine that so surprised the host that he said, "You have kept the good wine until now." A wine that appeared in overflowing abundance in a time of scarcity. This is the type of God we serve, the type of God we worship, the type of God whose grace is sufficient for all we need. It is the zeal for this truth that led Jesus to say, "Look, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; in your joy you go and sell all that you have to buy that field. The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls who finds one and sells all that he has to buy it." (Matthew 13:44-45)

Third and finally: Our faith compels us to confront the injustice and false irony of this world by telling the whole story of the gospel. Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, joining the crowds of Jewish pilgrims who'd gathered to celebrate Passover and remember how God broke the chains of oppression in Egypt. Jesus stepped into the courtyard of the temple and saw that things weren't right. There were purity laws and Leviticus legalities being followed, but where was the grace? Where was the praise and sense of holy awe in the presence of the Most High God? In effect, there was water for purification, but no abundant wine from the generous vines of a loving Creator. Jesus became angry. With a whip of cords he chased out the animals. He flipped the tables, turned things upside down and shouted, "This is God's house!"

But old habits are not broken easily. The tables were set back up; the animals corralled again. In time, this prophet would be deemed a danger to the temple and to the state. He would be arrested, charged, and sentenced to death. The whip of cords would reappear. Instead of being used on the sacrificial lambs sold for Passover, it would be used on the Lamb of God sacrificed for real that Passover.

But that's not the end of the story. Yes, the zeal for true faith did consume Jesus when he was killed on a cross. But in another way, it did not consume him. Like the Burning Bush before Moses that burnt yet was not consumed, Jesus was placed in a tomb that could not hold him. Jesus surrendered to a death that could not conquer him. The water of life flowed forth once more as the fine wine of abundant life. The crucified King became the resurrected Lord. The silenced one became the Word of Life whose message will be proclaimed to the end of the age. The One abandoned has rejoined our humble gatherings. The Light of the World has vanquished the power of darkness forever. Oh, the wonderful irony of it all!

The truth of our faith is bigger than this world's truth. The value of our faith is more precious than all this world's pearls and treasures and riches. And the irony of our faith is that it is in dying that we truly live. In letting go that we find what we've sought all along. In cleaning our temples, in trusting the promises of our faith, in worshiping the resurrected One who offers a love stronger than death, we are finally found and made whole and welcomed home at last. That is the source of our zeal, our passion, our life. May it be ever so.

AMEN