

This could happen here. The news headline read: VIOLENT PROTEST BREAKS OUT AS PASTOR UNVEILS FOURTH SERMON POINT. Trinity Hills Baptist Church erupted into total chaos after Pastor Greg abruptly jettisoned 30 years of tradition, adding on an unheard-of fourth point onto Sunday's sermon. "I just never thought this kind of heresy would come into these walls," said parishioner Tom Walgam. "God ordained the Trinitarian 3-point sermon from the dawn of Creation. I could see this kind of thing happening at a Catholic church, but here? Lord have mercy!"

Parishioners were caught completely off guard, with no warning whatsoever from the sermon outline. Pastor Greg had started off innocently enough, preaching on the story of the Prodigal Son. He dutifully identified the 3 characters of the story, son, father, and brother. Nothing ominous seemed afoot. As Pastor Greg rounded the bend on point #3, young parents dispensed their best child distractors, carefully rationing each Cheerio. At last, the final summary seemed at hand – markers were being capped, Bibles closed, crumbs swept away – when decades of triune sermon tradition were suddenly overturned.

Eyewitnesses say children led the revolt, rising out of the pews with screams and desperate pleas for fruit snacks. The old men gnashed their false teeth, while the old women let out a chorus of "Well I never!" A few young parents tried to maintain control with fresh coloring books; but soon, the dam broke.

Children began escaping out of the pews lobbing sippy cups at unsuspecting victims. Babies wailed, the elderly threw peppermints, and pregnant women streamed to the bathroom. The elderly unfolded walkers in unison, like an army preparing for battle.

Sources say that Pastor Greg has since apologized and repented for his outrageous behavior. The staff parish relations committee has placed him on preacher probation and hopes to somehow rehabilitate his Christian witness over the coming months. (from THE BABYLON BEE, sent via email.....)

OK, down to business. And don't get nervous, there are my usual, 3 points. There's a lot going on in the temple-cleansing story. It's more than concern about disrespecting sacred space. But the place to start is with the idea that the word 'sanctuary' means it is holy space. What was happening just outside the temple's sanctuary was that poor people were being ripped off as they sought to change the cash they brought with them into the kind of money required to purchase animals for sacrifice in the temple. The typical coins of the empire had the image of Caesar on it, considered an idolatrous image in the Jewish tradition, and therefore unacceptable for use in the temple. But people were being overcharged in this exchange.

Jesus wanted people treated fairly, which wasn't happening, and it made him angry. But there is a deeper meaning – Jesus' action was a reminder of earlier Jewish prophets who had warned people that God doesn't even want or need such sacrifices. Isaiah, for instance, quotes God as saying, "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.....bringing offerings is futile." (Is 1:11-17) The message of Jesus was that God wanted not barbequed beef or dove, but, rather, the dedicated, loving hearts of the people.

Second, there is something else going on in the temple-cleansing story, but to figure out what we need to turn to the Gospel of Mark's version of the story. There, after Jesus turned over the tables used for currency exchange, He quoted the prophet Isaiah, who, in turn, was quoting God: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations." (Is 56:7)

Almost any time we see the word 'nations' in the New Testament, it refers to non-Jews, Gentiles. So in this case, Jesus seems to be addressing the fact that all this buying and selling of animals for temple sacrifice was going on in what was called the Court of the Gentiles, which was the outer space in the temple. From the outside to the inside, there was the Court of the Gentiles, then the Court of the Women, then the Court of the Israelites, then the Court of the Priests.

If Gentiles were there to pray – which happened often enough that such Gentiles were given the name God-fearers – they were restricted to the Court of the Gentiles. In that court, the noisy marketing of animals made it almost impossible to think, much less pray. In other words, the system wasn't set up to be a good neighbor to non-Jews, despite the repetitive teaching that Jews were always and everywhere to welcome the stranger.

But so what? Well, this familiar New Testament story leads us to challenging questions for ourselves. What makes you angry? And are you angry about the right things?

To be angry about the right things means that whatever breaks God's heart also should break our hearts. And it's important to think through whether we're angry about the most important thing first before being angry about some secondary thing.

For instance, last year, when a Minneapolis police officer killed an unarmed black man named George Floyd, sparking nationwide protests and even riots, one response from some people went like this: "I'm sorry Floyd died, but tearing down cities must stop." That gets things backwards. To be like Jesus our response should be closer to this: "I'm sorry rioters are destroying property, but police officers must stop killing defenseless black people."

Do we see that the 2nd response puts the emphasis on the precious value of human life over the value of property? Obviously, this does not condone rioting, but the question is how Jesus would respond – in favor of people rather than property.

Beyond our figuring out whether we're angry about the right things, we need to think about our personal and communal responsibility to fix whatever makes us angry.

Third, truly righteous anger is not a response to some individual slight or disagreement, but rather, to some systemic breakdown. For example, if our public educational system isn't offering quality instruction to all students, no matter their race, gender or economic status, we need more than volunteers to tutor individual students. We need a societal commitment to provide the funding and policies that will achieve that quality education for all.

The same is true for almost any societal system we can name, perhaps starting with health care. If our current system isn't working for everyone in a fair and equitable way, our righteous anger should drive us to look for a systemic answer rather than simply helping to pay for one individual's medical bills out of the goodness of our heart. This latter response helps one person, but fixing an unfair system helps all.

In the Jerusalem temple, Jesus got angry not at individual money changers or animal sellers. Rather, He got angry at the whole system. His goal was to clear the decks and start again in a way that would honor God and God's holiness, not mock it by cheating people as they tried to get access to animals to sacrifice to a God who didn't really want such sacrifices anyway.

So Jesus was angry about the right things. And He was trying to fix what He accurately diagnosed as a broken system that exploited poor and innocent people.

In cleansing the temple, Jesus was putting anger into action on behalf of the downtrodden, the people being taken advantage of unfairly. Which reminds us that if Jesus was angry about the economic exploitation of the poor, we should be too. If Jesus was angry about something that was undermining people's faith in God, that should upset us too.

Of course, we need to be careful and not let our anger turn to violence, especially against other people – in words or deeds. The point to remember is that sometimes anger is exactly the right response when we see systems that oppress the very people for whom Christ died. But once we express that anger, our obligation is to propose solutions and work for their adoption instead of walking away in a huff. Stomping off is anger wasted, and a cop-out.

So we should not be angry if a restaurant overcooks our meal. Rather, we should be angry that the single mother waiting on our table must hold this second job to make ends meet because being a middle school English teacher doesn't pay her enough to support her family. Those are the kinds of things that would make Jesus angry. And that's what Jesus would try to fix.

This is hard, long-slogging work, but all of us are called to do our part. But we always deal with our righteous anger in a larger context – the plan of God. Martin Luther King could have easily surrendered to a sinful anger, full of hatred that his people had lived through so much suffering. But part of his genius and holiness was precisely his stubborn connecting of his people's anger with a keen sense of God's transcendent judgment. In a speech in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965, King told his listeners who, in their eagerness to set things right, were becoming impatient: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." And, after his home had been attacked, King informed an angry crowd of blacks who had gathered for vengeance that they must love their persecutors even as they hate what they had done. King knew that passion without righteousness is a short road to both moral and political chaos. (from *THE STRANGEST WAY*, Robert Barron, p. 84) Even when we are angry, we need to remember that God is in charge. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Amen.