

In his book called *WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS, READ THE INSTRUCTIONS*, James W. Moore tells about an older woman who was called to testify at a very dramatic trial. “One of the lawyers was famous for being tough and heartless, and he was really badgering her on the witness stand. He shouted loudly and pointed his finger, using all kinds of tricks to upset and fluster the woman. She prayed quietly to God for strength. She asked God to help her stay poised and find the right words.

“Just then the lawyer went into a tirade, asking a sarcastic, ruthless question, gesturing in a demeaning way, and shouting loudly.

“When he finished, she leaned forward, looked him straight in the eye, and said, ‘I’m not sure I got all that. Could you please scream it at me again?’

“When she said that, the jury broke up in laughter, spectators in the courtroom applauded, the judge even laughed, and the thoroughly humiliated lawyer said, ‘Oh just forget it! No more questions.’” (DYNAMIC PREACHING, King Duncan, Jan-April 2021, p. 47)

The city of Jerusalem in 33 AD was not like Apex. Jerusalem had only one church – and everybody went there. It was Passover Week, and it was a mob scene. The temple was tourist attraction #1, religion at its apex. Here were all the religious instincts of humanity on display. There was liturgical dance in the sanctuary, performance art in the courtyard, and a rock mass in the nave. You could buy a tour guide in the narthex, a cookbook in the transept, and bumper stickers for your chariot in the parish hall. Weight Watchers met in the Early Childhood Building, yoga in the hall, AA in Room 8. There was a prayer group in the Catechumenate room, a flower show in the fountain courtyard and group therapy in Room 6. And you could change your money at 5 convenient ATM locations. What a temple! What a church! God must be very pleased!

But there was a sudden uproar. People shouting and running in all directions, animals underfoot, loud crashes, splintering wood, coins rolling across the floor, tables upset, food all over the place, utter chaos and confusion. What in the world is going on? And we look around for the source of the uproar. Our eyes are drawn to a figure in the center – a man with a strong physical presence; a man whose face is flushed with anger, still breathing rapidly from sudden exertion, holding a crude whip of cords lashed together. We are told by witnesses that this one man, walking into the temple precincts like any other ordinary sightseer or worshipper, suddenly stooped over, took some rushes from the ground and twisted them into a whip (for of course no one was allowed to bring a sword or club into church) and began to lash out at all the perfectly innocent trades-people. The result was a huge mess.

No one is able to explain why this person has not been arrested. He acted as though He had every right to behave in this extraordinary way. He even said something about it being His father’s house: “You shall not make my Father’s house a house of trade” (Jn 2:16). There is apparently an imperial manner about the man, a corona of sovereignty that makes one think twice. “The Lord whom you seek shall suddenly come to His temple....but who shall stand when He appears? For He is a refiner’s fire.”

The religious authorities go up to Him. They do not lay a hand on Him; instead, they seem to be asking Him questions. Their main concern seems to be probing for the source of His strange authority: “What sign have you to show us for doing this?” – almost as if they really want to know. They seem to be thinking that maybe a man with so much power can be useful to them. Jesus’ reply cuts off any such speculation: “Destroy this temple, and in 3 days I will raise it up” (Jn 2:18-19).

And with that enigmatic rejoinder, the stranger passes unhindered through the crowd and continues on His way, while the temple authorities are left muttering to themselves, “it has taken 46 years to build this temple, and He will raise it up in 3 days?” (Jn 2:20)

It wasn't that Jesus lost His temper, but Jesus announced in an unmistakable way that He was Lord of the temple. That's what unnerved the religious leaders even more than the actions themselves. When He threw over the tables of the moneychangers, He was saying, I AM the messenger of the covenant, of whom the prophet spoke.

Jesus was also saying, in His action, I HAVE COME TO PURIFY THE WORSHIP OF MY FATHER. This was the prophet's announcement: He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord...” (Malachi 3:3). OUCH! You and I don't like this story any more than the people of Jesus' time did. We don't think we are in need of any refiner's fire. Oh, sure, we might need some minor polishing, some buffing; maybe we need some rough edges smoothed and some dents straightened to make us flawless, but we don't need a blast furnace, we're darn near perfect just the way we are. We don't want Jesus in here turning over the pews – or, to put it more accurately, He can turn over somebody else's pew, but not mine! We have worked hard to make our worship just the way we want it, and we don't want anybody – not even the Son of God – messing around with it. (adapted from THE UNDOING OF DEATH, Fleming Rutledge, p. 52-57)

So that's a bit of background. What is left for us, then? Where can we stand? Is it all bad news for us today? I think it might be worth a point on anger, and then housecleaning.

As Christians, we tend to justify ourselves with the phrase RIGHTEOUS ANGER, which I'd just as soon jettison, because the truth is, whether we're conservative or progressive, religious or not, everyone believes their anger is righteous, their cause is just, and their motives are pure. I know MINE are, but everyone else's are not! But if there's any kind of anger people of faith, morality, and conscience should aspire to, it is REDEMPTIVE ANGER, focusing on what results from our responses, the fruit of our efforts and our activism: Does our anger bring justice, equity, wholeness? Are more people heard and seen and respected in its wake? Is diversity nurtured -- or assailed because of our anger?

The word ANGER may be the problem since it's gotten some pretty bad PR over the past few million years. As people of faith, wanting to protect the common good, we might want to replace the word ANGER with FEROCITY: the way a family dog fiercely defends a small child from a coyote attack, the way a mother fiercely defends her baby in a fire, the way my little sister defended me when there was a giant, ARAGOG-like spider in the house. Ferocity for humanity is what birthed the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the fight for LGBTQ equality, the Black Lives Matter movement, propelling people into sacrificial acts of love on behalf of other people. And ferocity for human beings made in the image of God was the fuel for Jesus turning over the tables and calling out the religious leaders and declaring solidarity with the poor and allowing Himself to be executed.

We'll probably never see a pillow with words “Zeal for your house consumes me” needlepointed on it! But Jesus had passionate objections to seeing the powerful preying upon the vulnerable, watching the religious hypocrites pollute the system, witnessing the well-fed living close-fisted toward the hungry. We can't have this passionate response to the world without anger – ferocity – as its initial propellant. Anger – ferocity – is the spiritually combustible ignition point of social justice. Anger, used wisely, can be a very effective tool for change both in our society, and in ourselves. (adapted from John Pavolovitz, IF GOD IS LOVE, DON'T BE A JERK, p. 156-157)

Third, a story that illustrates these issues. Anne Tyler's novel SAINT MAYBE tells the story of a family created in the ashes of tragedy. Three young children are suddenly orphans. Ian Bedloe is a carefree, self-absorbed 19-year-old, who holds himself responsible for the deaths of their parents. His brother Danny, the children's father, kills himself in a late-night car crash after an angry confrontation with Ian. Danny's wife, grief-stricken and unstable, soon commits suicide. Torn by guilt, Ian immediately leaves college to bring up his 2 nieces and nephew. Over the next 20 years, Ian raises 3 wonderful, self-sufficient, caring kids from childhood to adulthood.

But the years of child-rearing take their toll on Ian, who put aside his own life dreams to raise the children. Concerned for their uncle, the 3 siblings hire Rita, a no-nonsense, I've-seen-it-all 'clutter counselor.' Rita goes immediately to work, mercilessly and unsentimentally throwing out 90% of the contents of Ian's refrigerator, and jettisoning all the useless and broken stuff stored in the rooms, attic, basement and closets. Over 4 days, Rita cleans, repairs and restores the tired little house.

With unerring perception, Rita recognizes the exhaustion of the lingering memories and long postponed decisions represented by all the clutter. At first, Ian sees Rita's work as pointless, but over time, the deep cleaning of his home restores not only Ian's home but his spirit and hope in the future.

This 'cleansing of the temple' is a watershed moment in the Gospel: Jesus seeks to restore the temple as a house of prayer for all by casting out the moneychangers and vendors who have distorted that vision. We accumulate so many things that distract us from the important and meaningful things of life – not only amassing possessions but storing up overwhelming feelings of fear, intimidation, disappointment, guilt, exhaustion. Lent is the season for a 'spring cleaning' of our spirits and souls: to 'drive out' of our lives whatever distracts us from the things of God and restore a sense of perspective in order to experience again God's loving, merciful presence in our lives. Amen. (from CONNECTIONS, 3 March 2024)