

“Again and Again: We Are Shown the Way”
John 2:13-22

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I recently took a class on community organizing. I learned a lot about how to bring people with shared passions together to work on issues that are important to them. One of the things we talked about in the class was the qualities of a leader. When we were asked what the qualities of a leader were, all of us students responded with things like, ‘Bold! Makes decisions! Strong voice! Listens! Has good ideas!’ We had this long list we brainstormed together. When we were finished, our teacher posted their list of the qualities that make a good leader. Almost nothing we named was on it. Instead it said:

- A leader should have followers - leaders need people willing to work with them.
- A leader should initiate, that is take steps, reach out to others.
- A leader should have a sense of humor - can’t take themselves or their work too seriously.
- A leader should have imagination, to be able to visualize something that doesn’t yet exist.
- A leader should be a risk taker, not reckless, but willing to take a chance on the unknown.
- A leader should have curiosity, ask questions, want to learn more.
- A leader should be indebted, that is realize they could not do their work without the help of other people and realize they are only able to do their work because of what came before them.
- And finally, we were taught that a leader should have anger.

Now, when our teacher walked us through the first seven characteristics, there were a lot of head nods across all the Zoom boxes and we chimed in saying, “Yeah! Great point! I never thought about that before!” When she got to the part where she said a leader should have anger, there was silence. Everyone froze. If we had been in person together it would have gotten really awkward. Finally someone said, “I don’t like that.” And the head nodding returned. We unpacked our perceptions of anger and there was pretty universal agreement that we associated it with being

out of control, with anger being something that cuts off relationships instead of building them, anger was something we tried to avoid and simmer down instead of encourage or celebrate.

Our teacher explained that anger is what drives us to make changes - we need to be upset enough, to be outraged enough that we will do something about it. Especially when working for things like justice or systemic change that takes years and is exhausting work - anger is the fuel that keeps us returning and helps us to recognize in our bodies when something is important. There is hot anger, which is what a lot of us know about, that feeling when we are controlled by our emotions, but there is also cold anger, which is when we control our emotions - we use our anger to have ice-cold clarity of a situation and to move to a place of strategizing and taking action as a way of turning our angry emotions into productive energy. Cold anger is what makes great leaders.

This new understanding of anger made more sense as I read the Gospel story of Jesus going to the temple and chasing everyone out with a whip, scattering coins and overturning tables. On the surface, that sounds like unbridled hot anger at work and reading this story always makes me a little squirmy. I prefer my Jesus as a healer and someone who loves sitting down and sharing a meal with people. I'll even take a little yelling now and then to drive a point home, but the temple scene is a lot to take in.

Under the surface of the story, I wonder if it is actually cold anger at work. It says he makes a whip, which is quite a powerful image, but it doesn't say he whips or physically harms anyone. And he scatters money and overturns tables of those who exchange currency - he doesn't push down those who exchange currency or throw the coins in their face. Even as he is acting, he is teaching, imploring people not to make this sacred place a place of business.

Jesus' actions pointed out that he was mad at *what* was happening, not at the people themselves. The currency exchangers were taking advantage of the fact that worshippers could not make an offering in the temple with their regular coins because they had the face of the Roman Emperor on them, so money changers exchanged them for other coins, charging a fee along the way and making a profit. And other people were there selling doves at sky-high prices, making that type of offering inaccessible to low income worshippers. The temple became a place that had an economic hierarchy and created an insider-outsider system instead of being a place where everyone could worship as one people of God. Jesus' anger at these actions propelled him to act in a way that initiated immediate change and called out these shady practices. For those of us who prefer passive discussions rather than protests and demonstrations, it can be easy to miss the powerfulness of this kind of leadership.

As a wider culture we have been debating about what it means to flip over tables and chase people out of systems or businesses or organizations or even individuals that are causing harm to groups of people. It has come to be synonymous with the phrase "cancel culture" which is used to describe a perceived overreaction to an unjust practice or action. This week Cancel Culture was criticized when the people who control Dr. Seuss's estate decided to stop publishing some of his books that contain racist imagery and storylines. Some folks said that you can't erase all the good he has done and written about just because of a few bad racist pages. Some people said this was a form of censorship.

It is clear to me that what we are struggling to understand is the difference between cancel culture and accountability. Racism portrayed in children's books, in text books, even in youth adult and adult books, does serious harm to people of color as well as to white people who receive messages that reinforce white supremacy. Racist images and stories continuing to be

produced should make us angry. We should want to rip them out of our libraries and schools and home collections. It should compel us to have hard conversations about how long we continue to celebrate artists even as their work or their beliefs or their legacy grows increasingly problematic. There aren't clear cut answers in every situation, but we should be angry enough to act and speak and even argue. Racism in any form should make us angry. Sexism should make us angry. Homophobia should make us angry.

When there are people or messages that are drawing us away from that anger, we should pause and ask who benefits when we stop being mad. Whose benefit is it to keep up the status quo? To simmer down strong emotions? To turn from ice-cold anger into lukewarm apathy? Who does that serve? Jesus' anger served God and God's people - it brought us back to understanding that everyone deserves a place to worship regardless of their station in life or their identity. Everyone deserves to have access to sacred places to connect with God in the midst of community. Jesus' anger served in building back up God's beloved community.

I want to end by sharing this poem from the Rev. Sarah Are who is featured in our daily Lenten devotional:

*I woke up and realized I was sitting at a table that oppression built.
The patriarchy made the food.
Cheap labor sewed the table cloth.
The guest list was exclusive.
Fear was the host.
And the people seemed happy,
But the food tasted awful.
Because milk and honey
Are reserved for God's promised day.
So hold onto your silverware, Because now that I see it,
I can't unsee.
This table is about to be flipped.*

May it be so. Amen.