The Upside of Anger
Based on John 2: 13-22

When I started seminary, I planned to be ordained as a Presbyterian. I had been part of a UCC church in college, and loved it, but all of my church involvement after college happened in Presbyterian (PCUSA) churches. When I enrolled in a Presbyterian Seminary in San Francisco, though, I soon found myself standing at the edge of a chasm – a huge gulf between what I believed and what the Presbyterians believed. All Christian denominations share most of their core tenets, and I could have attended a Presbyterian church without a problem, but I was headed for the clergy – and to be ordained, I would need to stand up and swear before God that I believed and was willing to teach all of their theology – and I didn’t. So, a year into seminary, I reconnected with the UCC, realized it was a much better denominational fit for me, and entered their ordination process.

During my first interview with the UCC Committee on Ministry, the group with the authority to approve me for ordination, someone asked me if I regretted not staying in the PCUSA, so that I could fight for gay ordination from the inside. They were worried I was running away from a fight I had been called to – that I might be settling for an easier path, because the UCC had been ordaining gay people for almost 40 years at that point.

I understood why they were asking, but my answer was clear.

“No,” I told them. I did not regret my decision to leave and I wasn’t running away from a fight, because it wasn’t my fight. You see, I believe that you have to deeply love something if you’re going to change it in a healthy way. I didn’t really love the Presbyterian Church. I loved the individual congregations I had been part of, but I didn’t love who they were in a broader sense. I didn’t love their official theology. I didn’t love their governance. I didn’t love a lot of the things that made Presbyterians so proud to be Presbyterian.

I respected the people and I respected their devotion to their faith, but it wasn’t my devotion. If I had stayed and tried to make changes from the inside, it would have been about my agenda, not God’s agenda. It would have been fueled by my anger and resentment of the system rather than my love for what it could be.

Now that’s not say that all decisions motivated by anger are bad. Anger can absolutely be holy – it depends on where it’s coming from. Anger that’s only fueled by hate or revenge is inevitably destructive. But anger fueled by love, and a deep yearning for God’s justice, is a beautiful thing. It has fueled almost every successful social movement in the world.

How many of you have seen the movie “Selma”? It played here at the Narrow Gauge briefly – I was hoping to organize a group viewing, but the movie was gone before I could. If you haven’t seen it, I hope you will.

Before I saw “Selma,” I didn’t know that it took three tries to march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. I thought there had been some preparation, some struggles, and then a triumphant march. But the true story was messier, with more false starts and much more heartbreak.

Yesterday, Saturday, marked the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday – the first of the three attempted marches from Selma to Montgomery. The march gained the nickname "Bloody Sunday" after its 600 marchers were attacked at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, a bridge named for the former Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan; state troopers and others who opposed their goals attacked the unarmed marchers with billy clubs and tear gas.

The anger of those with billy clubs was not an anger based in protecting the inherent worth of all people. It was not an anger fueled by the idea that there was enough for everyone to go around. It was an example of anger based in fear and hatred. But the passion that fueled those marchers and empowered them to keep organizing, to keep marching – *that* was an example of holy anger. *That* was an anger based in the deep conviction that the captives deserved liberation, and that God’s justice should roll down like waters.

The Selma marchers were walking to Montgomery to protest the local practices which denied African Americans the legal right to vote. Their commitment, fueled by that holy anger, changed the face of our country.

Sometimes holy anger is demonstrated in non-violent ways, like marches and sit-ins. And sometimes, when that anger can’t find an outlet, it boils over in more destructive ways, like we saw this year in Ferguson and New York. This isn’t the first time out country has experienced explosive riots - there were riots during the Civil Rights era, too (among other times). Martin Luther King, who preached nonviolence from every pulpit he visited, was asked about this more violent approach to change. He said, “Riots are the language of the unheard.” I heard that sentence quoted over and over again during the Ferguson riots. What I didn’t hear was the rest of his statement, which was, “Riots are the language of the unheard, and *what is it that America has failed to hear?”*

I wonder what stories we have failed to hear, in communities like Ferguson and New York? What accounts of mistreatment and systemic injustice we have written off or dismissed outright, since they don’t match our experience as white people, here in a town with an honorable police force?

Certainly there were people in Ferguson who looted and rioted for destruction’s sake, and that’s a shame. That wasn’t a holy act. That was destructive anger. But the vast majority showed up to protest because they had experienced or witness others be profiled and targeted, time and again, wearying day after wearying day, and *no one was paying attention.*

Can we deny that this was holy anger?

The people who protested in Ferguson, and around the country, were doing so because they would no longer be denied their inherent worth – their dignity as the children of God, created in the image of God. Theirs was an anger that sought justice, an anger that sought to rend the heavens, so light could pierce the darkness.

And for all those who tried to dismiss their accounts of injust treatment, we now have an impartial report that shows just how dark Ferguson had become.

Just this past Wednesday, the Department of Justice released a report claiming that “nearly every aspect of Ferguson’s law enforcement system” was corrupt. For example, Ferguson was one-third white and two-thirds black, but over the past thee years, African Americans accounted for 93% of arrests. The report also found that a disproportionate number of arrests, tickets, and use of force, were based in “unlawful bias” rather than black people committing more crimes. The report included racist e-mails sent by police and municipal court supervisors, repeated examples of profiling and bias in law enforcement and a system that seemed built upon using arrest warrants to squeeze money out of residents[[1]](#footnote-1). The very people who were charged with protecting the people of Ferguson were abusing them for their own gain. On Friday, just two days ago, Attorney General Eric Holder said he was considering dismantling the entire Ferguson police force.

During the riots of last August and through the fall, the media painted the protesters and rioters as “thugs,” but if we’re going to call brown people who refuse to stay quiet *thugs*, then we need to call Jesus one, too. Because he is the one who taught us that sometime holy anger can’t be contained. Sometimes, only knocking over tables can get the message across. Sometimes, when God’s kingdom gets perverted, you have to disrupt the peace until people pay attention.

Today’s story about Jesus turning over tables and throwing out the moneychangers, is found in all four gospels, but only in John does it show up at the beginning instead of the end. I think that’s because John believed that this story illustrated something core to who Jesus was.

Before we talk about the events of that day, let’s look at the broader context of what was going on in the Temple. Jesus was just one of countless pilgrims who came to the Temple for Passover every year. Families traveled from all over with their lambs and doves and other animals to be sacrificed. Everyone knew the codes in Leviticus, which said that the sacrificial animal had to be pure, so people would spend all year saving the best for their offering; making sure their animal was unblemished. But then they would arrive at the temple, only to be told that their offering wasn’t good enough, and if they wanted to make an offering, they would have to buy one of the temple-raised animals. And if that’s not enough, they were told that they couldn’t use Roman money in the temple, because it would be idolatrous to use coins with the face of Caesar imprinted on them, so the temple money changers would exchange the Roman coins for purity coins[[2]](#footnote-2) – for a small fee, of course – and then they could use these “purity coins” to buy a “pure” animal, at a grossly inflated cost.

But what if you didn’t bring enough money to buy a better animal? What if giving up one of your own flock was all that you could afford, and even that was a sacrifice? Well, then you could trade in the one you brought and take out a loan for the remainder of the price at a low, introductory rate. Sure, usury was prohibited in the Torah, but surely it didn’t count if the money collected went towards the Temple.

So when Jesus showed up –

Jesus, who loved the teachings of Scripture

Jesus, who loved the people of God,

Jesus, who loved God enough to call him “Abba,” which means not just Father but the more intimate *Daddy*,

-- this was the scene Jesus saw.

He discovered the complete mockery being made of God’s people, and God’s law. It was a perversion of the very idea of sacrifice: the injustice of squeezing the poorest and telling them that the best they had still wasn’t good enough to bring before God.

And he exploded.

His fellow pilgrims were trying to be in relationship with God, and the Temple elite were abusing their power and abusing the purity codes to extort money and deny people access to the Creator they loved. The purity codes were devised to help people bring their best to God – it was about showing love and respect, not demonstrating perfection. They weren’t intended to be a barrier between God and the people God loved.

Jesus looked around the Temple that day and saw that the people tasked with protecting God’s vision were instead distorting it for their own benefit. It offended Jesus to his very core, and he sought to reform it.

And so that is what he did, throughout his short, yet profound ministry. Through the remainder of his life and witness – just three years - he embodied a different way of practicing faith – a kind of disruptive love that became his hallmark, and ultimately became the blueprint for the radical new Way that we have come to call Christianity.

If you think about it, Christianity is really all about disruptive love.

- A disruptive love that welcomes outcasts back into community and reminds us that justice is the currency of God’s love.

-A disruptive love that puts the last first and the first last – which Jesus demonstrated by kneeling down and washing his students’ feet in his final days, commanding them to love one another as he had loved them.

-A disruptive love that bothered the religious authorities of his day, so much that they called him a blasphemer and ultimately an enemy of the state

- A disruptive love that led him to the cross – to death at the hands of the authorities

– A disruptive love that rolled away the stone, so the cross and tomb were not the last word.

Because the lesson of Lent and Easter, the lesson we learn anew every year, is that God’s justice *must* roll down like water. God’s justice *cannot* be denied. God’s will *is* done, and God’s Kingdom *is come.*

And the good news, my friends, is that we are *inheritors* of this story; *heirs* of the disruptive love that makes room for all to join in. So when we see evidence of disruption around us, rather than running from the discomfort or immediately criticizing it, let us lean into and ask where Jesus might reside in the midst of it. If we can answer that question, then we’ll find where our work begins.

*Amen.*

1. http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/documents/national/department-of-justice-report-on-the-ferguson-mo-police-department/1435/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://day1.org/525-far\_more\_than\_bingo [↑](#footnote-ref-2)