

Message: “What Sign?”

Coffee anyone? Early one cold morning, a husband and wife were arguing over who should get out of the warm bed to make coffee. Finally, the wife said, “You have to make coffee. It’s in the Bible!”

The husband was shocked. “It’s not! Show me!”

Pulling out her Bible, the wife opened it to the New Testament and declared, “It says right here - Hebrews!”¹

Sometimes a little humor is just what we need to lift us up from the doldrums. And this is good, because we can easily find ourselves down when we take in the scriptures for today. We’re sitting in the tension of Moses and the people receiving the ten commandments and Jesus angrily overturning tables in the temple. Both are deep, with layers of meaning.

It’s a feast and a famine. When we teach and preach about the passages, it’s a feast. There’s a lot here. When we try to apply the messages, we can find ourselves in a famine. We struggle to understand, much less agree with, or put into practice Mosaic Law and Jesus’ lesson. We can feel afraid, overwhelmed, or confused.

So, where do we start? I believe the starting point is our relationship with God. The commandments and Jesus’ outburst in the temple seem to make more sense when we recognize they flow from the nature of our relationship with a God of peace and justice.

We can turn to Exodus 19 to see evidence. Three months after leaving Egypt, the people of Israel arrived at Mt. Sinai. God called Moses up on the mountain and said, “*This is what you should say to the Israelites... I lifted you up on eagles’ wings and brought you to me. So now, if you faithfully obey me and stay true to my covenant, you will be my most precious possession out of all the peoples*” (vv3-5).

This is the precursor to what follows. God made a vow - a covenant, with Abraham. God renewed the covenant with Isaac and Jacob. And now, 400 years later, God is renewing the covenant relationship with

¹ <https://www.stewardshipoflife.org/jokes/>

Moses and the people. The commandments are a summary of how God expects us to live in relationship to God, each other and our neighbors.

The reason for this covenant being offered is stated succinctly.

God offers it. Keeping commandments isn't a means of entering a relationship with God. It's the way an already existing relationship - one created solely by God's grace - is lived out. Relationships come first.

You may wonder why the statements are couched in mostly negative ways. Some suggest it's because norms that are stated positively leave us in doubt about limits. While "*You shall not commit adultery*" doesn't tell me how to cherish my spouse, it leaves no doubt about what I *can't* do and still cherish my spouse. These are expressions for the norms of human life in relationship with God and with our neighbors.

Now, it probably comes as no surprise, but the response of the people to this whole situation was fear. They stood at a distance. They were afraid to speak to God. They only wanted to speak to Moses and listen to him. Moses encouraged them saying, "*Don't be afraid, because God has come only to test you and to make sure you are always in awe of God so that you don't sin*" (v20).

What do you mean "test"? Paul teaches us how to view the Law. Its purpose is to make us aware of our failure - our sin, so we can turn to God when we are tempted and receive grace(our test). The result: grace rules because God is righteous. God wants us to ace the test. This is the way to eternal life in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:20-21). The Spirit of life in Christ does what is impossible for the Law: it sets us free (8:2).

The commandments are like training wheels for people who have only known slavery all their lives. We are the same. When you've only been taught bad practices, you need help. They point us to the only person who can set us free from the evil we do and help us do the good we want to do. God's Spirit breaks our chains, giving us real life, here and now, and for all of eternity.

With this as the backdrop, we turn to Jesus cleansing the temple.

Note: Jesus doesn't sit down and tell the disciples what he's going to do or why he did what he did. Jesus is angry, so he acts! The disciples later remembered the words of Psalm 69:9, "*Because passion for your house*

has consumed me, the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me!” Jesus is passionate in his love of God. He just can’t bear to see what the leaders are promoting in place of worship and prayer. They are insulting God which insults him.

Jesus acts on his anger. We recognize this emotion as humans, but struggle with the idea of godly anger or godly emotions other than love. So, let’s talk about anger. “Anger is an emotion that consumes mind and body - but sometimes anger is necessary for survival.”² Jesus was angry because of the unjust way the leaders were teaching the people to be, all because of their own greed. They were passing on the wrong way to live in relationship with God and their neighbors.

Father Richard Rohr says anger can help develop healthy individuals and communities. He says, “Anger is ... necessary to protect appropriate boundaries of self and others. Anger becomes self-defeating and egocentric when it hangs around too long after we’ve received its message. But conscious, visible, felt anger is a gift to consciousness and to community. We need it to know who we are and what boundaries must be defended, along with the depth of hurt and alienation in ourselves and in others.”³

Many spiritual traditions warn us against anger. We are told anger provides fertile ground for seeds of discontent, anxiety, and potential harm to self and others. This is true. We need to beware. However, when systems of injustice inflict generational abuses upon people and communities because of their ethnicity, race, sexuality or gender, anger as righteous indignation is appropriate, healthy, and necessary for survival.

Jesus expressed righteous indignation when he encountered the unjust systems of his time, yet Christian theologies often shy away from anger. How can churches continue to ignore anger and still be relevant during this era when everyone is angry about everything? People are angry about brutality, supremacy, privilege, and economic marginalization, among other things.

² <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/good-and-necessary-anger/>

³ *Ibid*

When a community is being oppressed, a theology of anger helps people see that anger as a response to injustice is spiritually healthy. A theology of anger can help us to construct healthy boundaries ... [and] the healthy expression of righteous anger can translate communal despair into compassionate action and seeking justice. But this takes work. It's not simply a passionate outburst over a perceived slight. It's not about the style of worship or applauding the goodness of God's blessings. It's about true injustice and hurt.

The question is whether or not we will recognize our wounds and the source of our anger so we can heal ourselves and others and awaken to our potential to embody the beloved community.

Ephesians 4:26 offers a surprising lesson, “Be angry but do not sin.” There's anger, and then there's anger. Yes, there's the anger of being cut off in the turn lane, of having a wait time exceeding four minutes, or of being bullied. Then there is the anger leaving us shaken because a sacred trust is being treacherously broken; because those who have done no harm are being gratuitously harmed; because those who have too little now have even less, and those who already have much too much now have even more; because egregious wrongs are being perpetrated, and the perps don't even admit the wrongs they're perpetrating are wrong.

How do we apply this in our life? I invite you to embrace the path Richard Rohr offers: “Anger is a spark that motivates us forward. Love is a pathway that funnels our motivation in an impactful direction.”⁴

“If we take a theology of anger seriously, first we come together, then we grieve together, then we consider where we are and where we are going. If there is opportunity, we engage in deep considerations of cause and effect, and we listen for the whispers of the Holy Spirit. Our health and wholeness require us to take off our mask of Christian piety and do the difficult work of acknowledging our anger, vulnerability, and pain. It is this contemplative work which moves us toward forgiveness, for when we recognize our own human frailty, we can more easily forgive the fragility and failings of others.”⁵

⁴ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/jesus-anger/>

⁵ *Ibid*

Jesus knew this. He knew the anger of the leaders would lead to his suffering and death. Jesus spoke about the power of resurrection to meet us where we are, build a new community, and bring peace with justice. He lived life just as we live life, but he rose above it. Forgiveness and love change the world. We are being raised up to gather, sing, pray and commune while embracing God. Jesus points us back to our covenant relationship with God. For only in God's love can the unjust and sinful ways we behave toward each other find pardon and healing. Jesus is setting the example for us to follow. He is the sign pointing us to God.

This begs a question: What honors God first and lifts people into God's presence when we come together? Things which distract and demean ought to be avoided. Gathering and elevating people is what we need to do, where we need to be. We live in a world that can destroy the soul. If we are to stand against that which tears down, we need to consider how we are building up.

So, let's be alert to distractions from our true purpose of worshiping God and building up the body. Distractions aren't always as obvious as preying upon people through greed or narcissism. They usually aren't obvious. We can focus first on being true to our relationship with God, each other and our neighbor. We celebrate Christ's resurrection, but we can also look toward being raised with him. Embrace your righteous anger and then let it refocus you on the way of love. To God be the glory.

Let us pray ...

Exodus 20:1-17 (CEB)

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

You must have no other gods before me.

Do not make an idol for yourself - no form whatsoever - of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. Do not bow down to them or worship them, because I, the Lord your God, am a passionate God. I punish children for their parents' sins even to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. But I am loyal and gracious to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Do not use the Lord your God's name as if it were of no significance; the Lord won't forgive anyone who uses his name that way.

Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. Six days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. Do not do any work on it - not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your animals, or the immigrant who is living with you. Because the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them in six days, but rested on the seventh day. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Honor your father and your mother so that your life will be long on the fertile land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Do not kill.

Do not commit adultery.

Do not steal.

Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.

Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's house. Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox, donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

John 2:13-22 (CEB)

It was nearly time for the Jewish Passover, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. He found in the temple those who were selling cattle, sheep, and doves, as well as those involved in exchanging currency sitting there. He made a whip from ropes and chased them all out of the temple, including the cattle and the sheep. He scattered the coins and overturned the tables of those who exchanged currency. He said to the dove sellers, “Get these things out of here! Don’t make my Father’s house a place of business.” His disciples remembered that it is written, *Passion for your house consumes me.*

Then the Jewish leaders asked him, “By what authority are you doing these things? What miraculous sign will you show us?”

Jesus answered, “Destroy this temple and in three days I’ll raise it up.”

The Jewish leaders replied, “It took forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?” But the temple Jesus was talking about was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.