

## *No More Mr. Nice Guy*

A sermon preached by  
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at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral

Third Sunday in Lent / March 4, 2018  
1 Corinthians 1:18-25 / John 2:13-22

We have mixed feelings about anger.

I do, as I look back on how I was taught to handle  
anger when I was growing up.

I had a mother who was a genteel Tennessean,  
with high standards of politeness,  
for which I am grateful.

She also instilled in me a wariness around  
negative feelings, a sense that maybe you  
shouldn't express angry thoughts.

As though I needed to fear anger.

You know the saying: "Speak when you're angry  
and you'll make the best speech you'll ever  
regret." Well, there's some truth in that.

When I meet with couples, married or pre-married, anger is often a huge issue.

I tell them, you will get irritated and angry with your spouse; you will if you are honest and your relationship healthy.

It's not *whether* you will, it's how you process those feelings. You can stuff anger, only for it to leak out in unhealthy ways, or even to explode.

You can nurse it and coddle it and relish it, making you lash out, crush the spirit of another.

But anger doesn't have to be destructive. It's the unhealthy ways we ignore it or vent it that give us problems.

Anger can have a constructive role.

Anger, rightly expressed,  
can catch a person's attention.

Anger can spark insight, if someone tells us they are angry for our doing a wrong to them.

We might finally only take that person seriously when they say, "Look I'm angry about this."

I needed a shift in how I viewed anger.  
I'm learning: Pay attention to it; don't fear it.

And I think we make that shift when we look a  
story like we read today from John,  
a shift when it comes to our picturing of Jesus.  
I think we may be too prone to keep Jesus as some  
never-make-waves figure who only ever  
exudes niceness: Jesus as Mr. Rogers  
with a beard and sandals.

Today's reading helps us dispel forever the myth  
that Jesus is only a nice guy.  
*Gentle* Jesus, meek and mild?  
More like *rugged Jesus, fierce and wild*:  
Tough, tenacious, zealous.  
We need this side of Jesus, too.

This is the picture we get in the Gospel: his grit.  
His authority, and glory, and emotional strength,  
And yes, his hot, holy anger.

At first I thought, reading this passage as I prepared this message, I'm not sure *anger* is exactly the right word for what we see Jesus exhibiting today in our Gospel reading.

Maybe righteous indignation?

I know how a Bible study attender once said, "Isn't anger just a *human* emotion. So this anger was just Jesus's human side!"

That's too easy. What we see here was divine. It's the fiery insistence that we saw in prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Now, if that angriness were our *only* picture of God, well, we'd be in trouble. But I think we've gone too far in downplaying this side.

I think one reason some people aren't that drawn to Jesus is we've made him too soft, too nice. We have lost some of the vibrancy of the portrait we get today in John's Gospel.

Billy Graham died a little more than a week ago. 215 million heard his preaching, usually in packed stadiums. I did. Growing up in Southern California, I can tell you his presence was felt there as vividly as here in the Carolinas.

I was moved by his vigorous words.  
He preached grace, but with burning fire.  
He knew Jesus inspired reverence, respect.

And today we see a lot of grit in the Gospel.  
“The Passover of the Jews was near,” John tells us, “and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.  
In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.”

Now, to understand what is going on here it helps to know some background. The Jewish people offered all kind of sacrifices at the temple.

The whole system of sacrifices, commanded in the Hebrew Scriptures, helped to remind them of their sin. The bloodiness made for

a visual, visceral reminder.

The graphic nature of it reinforced God's insistence that when the people did wrong, they should acknowledge their failure.

They would sacrifice an animal and realize again that sin requires attention, even sacrificial penance.

But how many people could raise their own animals, the doves and lambs and bulls?

So people would buy them, there at the Temple. The house of God became a bustling marketplace.

And people came from other provinces, with currency from another country.

They needed someone to help them with exchanging their money for local currency.

Thus the money changers. And the house of God got not only commercialized, but chaotic.

The reverence got lost in the crassness.

So like the prophets before him, Jesus protested  
against their profaning God's temple  
and trampling on the holy.

That took grit. That took someone  
with fortitude and authority.

The other Gospel writers have this story of the  
cleansing of the temple toward the end of Jesus'  
ministry, in fact, they present it  
as the ultimate reason that the religious leaders  
plotted to kill him.

In John's Gospel the temple cleansing happens  
right after the first of Jesus miraculous signs,  
When he turns the water into wine at a wedding at  
Cana of Galilee. John tells us that that miracle at a  
wedding was "the first of his signs ... and  
revealed his glory." (2:11).

And now, after the kindness of that act,  
that pure generosity to a couple  
gives way to his cleansing the temple,

as if confirm that his is a glory that is about more  
than compassion and politeness.

It's also a force of nature.

When Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell it, within a  
week of the temple cleansing, Jesus is dead, and  
his throwing out the money changers and  
upsetting the temple routine came as the trigger.

I see here not gentle Jesus meek and mild.

But the grit of rugged Jesus, fierce and wild.

I see sheer audacity when we realize that  
Jerusalem was packed with Jews who had come  
for Passover, perhaps 300,000 pilgrims.  
Think of Wall Street--how tumultuous, loud, and  
bone-shaking our financial trading floors are—  
and then add livestock!

One historian said that during the Feast of the  
Passover one year, 255,000 lambs were bought,  
sold, and sacrificed in the temple courts.



With what Jesus did the animals would have been  
bawling and bleating and running around,  
The money changers scrambled for their coins in  
the dust and dung on the floor.  
And of course, the officials are getting ticked off.

But it doesn't faze Jesus.  
His zeal, his passion for his heavenly Father and  
his Father's house won't let him back off.  
No more Mr. Nice Guy.  
Rugged Jesus, fierce and wild.  
Thanks be to God!

Because here we glimpse Jesus' steady  
determination, his urgency to do his Father's will,  
We see one here who had it in him to trudge to the  
Cross. One who faced down the glares and curses  
of the money changers would hike without  
flinching to the horrors of Crucifixion.

After hearing that, do you still want a Jesus meek  
and mild, a soft, easily intimidated,  
passionless Jesus?

I'd prefer the grit, thank you.

Pure grit.

But something else: Also blessed grace.

Grit *and* grace. Grace to those who need it.

Grace for those who know that by themselves they could never muster the strength and the holiness to earn it for themselves. Which is why Sunday after Sunday we confess our sins during worship, and hear the words of absolution.

A little holy fear and reverence is good, but it should not paralyze us, drive us from God.

For look at where this story takes place-- the outer court--the court of the Gentiles, that is, the area where non-Jews, that's what Gentile means—could go.

Far from the holy precincts further in—this was the only part where non-Jews were allowed.

“And this was the place where the Gentiles were supposed to find God through quiet reflection and

prayer. [No wonder] Jesus's reaction to all this  
was to start throwing the furniture over."

Keller, Timothy. *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (pp. 154-155).

With a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of  
the temple and swept the coins off the tables.

Jesus was challenging their consumerism,  
but also the whole sacrificial system altogether.

He was saying that the Gentiles—the pagan,  
unwashed Gentiles—those far off,  
now had ready access to God.

Which means so can all of us.

So what kindles Jesus' anger  
really points to great news.

Grit. But grace.

Not merely Jesus meek and mild.

And not just Jesus fierce and wild.

But also a faithful Jesus by whom  
we are reconciled.

For the cleansing of the temple "points toward the  
replacement of the temple with the temple of

Jesus' body," as one commentator notes. Jesus' death would now embody this system of sacrifices in a better way, a more universal way.

A way that we still capture every Sunday in the Eucharist, when we say that Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.

Still, some of us may be tempted to turn our faith into something we have to earn.

We have to make the thing happen.

We have to perfect some sacrifice.

But here's the really good news: We don't have to impress God. We don't buy his affection.

It's simpler than that.

Which is why Paul's passage, his letter to the Corinthians, fits today, as well.

For while the cross, he wrote, "is foolishness to those who are perishing, ... to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ... we proclaim Christ crucified."

That's the sacrifice we need.

Meek and mild. Fierce and wild. But also in him,  
a way for us to be reconciled.

We don't bargain for it. God's mercy is given.

We don't achieve it. We receive it.

God won't let anything stand between  
you and that gift.

Those who tried to put anything in between  
God and his people sparked Jesus' fury.

Ultimately, that's good news.

What God offers requires much on God's part:

Grit. But it's freely given: Grace.

Take what you need from the very person who  
alone can give it. He's rugged, a little wild,  
but no need to be afraid.

For those of us who want his mercy, who receive  
it, it's ours for the taking.