

A SERMON

by Rev. Joann H. Lee: January 18, 2026



John 2:13-25

The Passover of the Jews was near, 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.

Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'

The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the

word that Jesus had spoken.

When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

A prayer by John van de Laar called: **OVERTURNING TABLES**.

Truth be told, Jesus, there are lots of tables that need overturning in our lives;

Beneath the veneer of respectability, the tidy rows and neat regulations

hide dark addictions and angry judgements

hungry greeds and heartless rejections

We know the pain—and so do those around us—of keeping up the facade;

What a relief it would be to have it all upset, smashed, scattered, destroyed

So, perhaps, Jesus, today you could pay us a visit

and help us to radically rearrange the furniture of our lives

Amen.

THE FIRST TIME I YELLED AT SOMEONE IN PUBLIC, I WAS DEFENDING IMMIGRANTS—my parents, actually. I was about ten years old and at the dry cleaners where my parents worked, as I often was on weekends.

At some point during the day, a customer came in and got really upset about something. Maybe their clothes weren't ready on time or maybe a stain didn't come out the way they'd hope. I can't quite remember the exact dispute. And customers got upset about things like that all the time.

But this time was different, because I remember tone and tenor of the customer's voice as they began to berate my parents. It went beyond the frustration of inconvenience. She was derisive and dehumanizing as she yelled and cursed at my parents.

I could not, for the life of me, figure out why this person thought her clothes were more important than the dignity of another human being. And so I lost it. If I could've turned over the tables, I would've, but the tables were nailed to the floor.

Instead, I yelled back at this customer, using some choice words that I had just heard her call my own parents. My anger and my yelling shocked the customer into leaving in a huff.

My parents, too, were shocked and a little concerned. I was not a loud kid growing up. I rarely got into trouble and never got into fights. But here I was, their bookish, shy child, yelling at a grown adult, and a customer no less. I can only imagine what they were thinking at that moment, but for me, it was a watershed moment, one of those core memories that stay with you and shape who you become. Because I made the choice, then and there, that I would not let people treat me or my parents like that, that I would not let them yell at us or act like they were better than us. And I learned that, for better or for worse, I simply am incapable of silence when I feel a sense of injustice rising up inside me.

And so, you can imagine the kind of yelling I want to do today as we witness immigrants and citizens alike being harassed and harmed and even shot and killed by those who think they're better than us.

Most of you know that I lived in the Twin Cities, St Paul to be exact, right across the Mississippi River from Minneapolis. It was a short stint of four years, but an amazing opportunity and time in ministry.

I am horrified and so angry by what is happening there. But my goodness – the communities and people of faith, many of whom are colleagues I've known, are stepping up, speaking out, leading with immense courage and compassion. And I am so grateful for their tireless work even in the midst of their fear.

And, if I'm honest, I'm also a little relieved that so many in the city and state are willing to forego their "Minnesota Nice" because that just won't cut it when it comes to ICE.

The angst and anger that so many of us now feel, and that once used to be considered so impolite and unnecessary, are giving birth to movements for justice.

You see, anger is often given such a bad rap, isn't it? It's feels out of line, and it makes people uncomfortable. Sometimes it gets loud and emotional, and Presbyterians often pride ourselves on being a brainy, erudite bunch, not so much the emotional or passionate type.

In fact, there are even some who would argue that being angry in and of itself is sinful.

Now, while I agree that *when we're angry*, there can be a greater temptation to be cruel or to become bitter, Ephesians 4:26 (NRSV) says, "Be angry, but do not sin," which implies that being angry in and of itself is not the sin but what we do with that anger that can become sin.

Most of us have been told, by our adults or by society, to tamp down our anger, to ignore it and pretend that it doesn't exist. My parents, actually, after the incident at the store, tried to shield me from getting angry again, by telling me to work in the back of the cleaners rather than up front where I could hear or argue with the customers. They've always been a little uncomfortable with all the feelings their child seemed to have.

And I imagine several of you got a similar message: Don't get mad. And if you do, don't show it. Right?

But, friends, now is not the time to placate our anger. Now is the time to be angry like Jesus.

And Kristin Fontaine outlines what that means. She writes: "Anger should always flow upward. If I'm going to use my anger as fuel to confront a person or an institution, they should be more powerful than me or the group I am trying to get justice for..."

Jesus directed his anger at those who monetized worship and who were profiting, in particular, off of the poor and disadvantaged. He then directs his service and compassion to those who ... come to him for help.

Jesus does not spread his anger about or explode in rage at the person nearest to him. He channels his rage at a specific target, and to effect a specific result..."

She continues: "Anger, when used as a motivating force to act for justice is not bad.

Anger is a sign. Anger can be prophetic. Anger, when used as a tool, can be a powerful force for positive change."

Friends, anger itself is not the sin.

Injustice is sin. Failing to welcome the stranger and the immigrant is sin. Murder and kidnapping are sin.

Our anger and outrage that the federal government is doing all these things with seeming impunity, is not sin. It is a natural and compassionate response to the heartbreakingly state of this world.

Professor Steve Thomasin at Luther Seminary, located in Minnesota, writes that, "Anger is, what psychologists call, a secondary emotion. It is like physical pain. Pain is a good thing because it alerts us to the fact that there is an injury or that something is not right in our body. Anger is like that.

When we become angry it is a sign that something has been violated. ...

Getting angry isn't bad. It's what you do with anger that makes it wrong." [\(1\)](#)

So, feel your feelings. Be angry if you need to. But *if you're angry, be angry like Jesus.*

And here's how Jesus got angry: First, Jesus's anger, to use Fontaine's words, flowed upward. He channeled his anger at people and institutions with power. He doesn't get mad at Zacchaeus who has probably cheated people out of their money; nor does he get mad at the Samaritan woman whom he meets at the well. He has great compassion for those individuals, even though they were known as sinners.

Instead, he gets angry with the temple authorities and religious leaders who were making a mockery of sacred space and defrauding faithful pilgrims seeking to make a sacrifice.

So, channel your anger upwards.

Second, Jesus was often angry on behalf of those who were the most poor and disadvantaged in his society. He didn't blame the widow for mooching off the system. He didn't scapegoat the foreigners for making Israel unsafe.

He understood that they were often on the margins and getting exploited. So he got angry on their behalf.

Rarely did he get angry for himself. If he ever got yelled at by an individual, he wasn't going to yell profanities or give them the finger. His anger wasn't about slights to him because his ego didn't depend on what people thought of him. He was God's beloved child, and he could rest in that truth.

So when we get angry, we should check ourselves, remind ourselves that we, too, are God's beloved children, and to consider on whose behalf we are getting angry.

For Jesus, it was always for those on the margins and the most vulnerable.

So can we say the same?

And finally, Jesus's anger is always accompanied by courage, compassion, and action. Following this angry episode at the temple, he is able to speak truth to a pharisee named Nicodemus and extend radical welcome to a Samaritan woman. What is inspired by his anger is a deep and abiding love.

Most of us can't quote John chapter 2 where today's scripture is from. But I bet many of you do know John 3:16 which Jesus says just sixteen verses after the cleansing of the temple: "For God so loved the world ..." right?

So when Jesus gets angry, it is accompanied by compassion for those being harmed, and love, even for those whom we consider our enemies.

Without compassion, courage, love, and action our anger is just our own, eating us alive with bitterness and hate. But with compassion, courage, and love, our anger can be a force for good in the world.

Nikita Gill writes poetry for our time. And she says:

The rage you are feeling
comes from the same place
inside your heart as the love.
This is why you refuse to accept
a world where cruelty reigns
and the fire consumes all.
You have known hope
and joy and kindness
like you have known water.
And justice is a river
that demands
you do not give up on it.

People of faith who follow Jesus and seek justice cannot help but feel anger in these days of brutality, lies, and authoritarianism.

It's certainly not new to the history of these United States. Afterall, we celebrate the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. this weekend. And he used his anger at the injustice of segregation to create change and action.

His daughter Bernice once shared that: "As he (Dr. King) grew older, and went to college and theological school, he (Martin Luther King, Jr.) realized that non-violent resistance offered a way to channel anger into positive forms of protest."

In an NPR article titled "The Power of Martin Luther King Jr's Anger," she is quoted as saying: "If you internalize anger, and you don't find a channel, it can destroy you ... 'That's why when Daddy reiterated, 'Hate is too great a burden to bear,' he knew it was corrosive and erosive."[\(2\)](#)

So rather than let our anger become a burden that corrodes and erodes our joy, gratitude, and lives. Let us follow the example of Dr. King, using it to nonviolently speak out and protest against the wrongs of this world. Because your anger matters. It is a sign that something is wrong. And if we pay attention and let Jesus guide the way our anger is used, then justice and change are possible in this world.

Dr. King, through protests, boycotts, marches, and letters, expressed his anger.

And Jesus, through marches, resistance - like breaking the laws of healing on the sabbath - expressed his anger. He even overturned tables and cracked a whip, wreaking holy havoc to express his anger.

So let us be angry like Jesus. The world is waiting.

Amen.

[\[1\]](https://www.stevethomason.net/2014/01/22/jesus-got-mad-a-sermon-on-john-213-25-jesus-cleanses-the-temple/) <https://www.stevethomason.net/2014/01/22/jesus-got-mad-a-sermon-on-john-213-25-jesus-cleanses-the-temple/>
[\[2\]](#) "The Power Of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Anger" February 20, 20194:33 PM ET, Heard on All Things Considered, Nell Greenfieldboyce 2010.

