

# “Jesus, Anger and Justice”

I Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22

IV of IX in the Sermon Series “Jesus”

*Jeffrey Window panel “Shall be a House of Prayer”*

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From the Pulpit

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# “Jesus, Anger and Justice”

I Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 3, March 3, 2024, dedicated to the Rev. Drs. William J. Barber, II and Liz Theoharis, to the Poor People’s Campaign and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.  
Amen.*

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What is your relationship with anger? Similarly, what is your relationship with social justice? Where and when in your life has your absolute table turning anger in the face of injustice moved you to flip tables – literally or spiritually? Today, anger growing out of social injustice collide in John 2 and the image in our Jeffrey Window.

In John 2:13-22, Jesus walks into the temple of Jerusalem and is confronted with social injustice being inflicted by the religious elites and their money-making minions who are busy extracting the last ounce of blood money from the poor people of Judaism. In the game of sacrificing animals to cleanse people’s sins, vendors are making money selling cattle, sheep, and doves to be turned into burnt offerings to God. Money changers – like present day payday lenders – are ripping off the poor by charging exorbitant rates as the poor get poorer to purchase these sacrificial animals.

The rich buy the cattle. The middle class buy the sheep. And the poor – if they go deep enough in debt – will buy doves in the economy of sacrifice – which packs the passageways in the temple’s Holy of Holies.

Jesus’ stomach is turning as vendors, money changers, and crowds of customers are doing the business of sacrifice everywhere around him with Passover arriving in Jerusalem to be celebrated while the odor of gouging the poor fills his nostrils and all of the air along with the rising smoke of burnt animal flesh.

Jesus has smelled enough. He has seen enough. He gets really, really mad. He focuses his anger as cold anger and quietly sits to weave a whip of chords. Then he stands up and rages as he uses his whip to drive the cattle and the sheep, the vendors and the money changers out of the temple. Tables are crashing. Coins are flying. Doves are flying around the temple grounds. Jesus yells, *“Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”*

This is not easy listening Jesus. This is not healing hands Jesus. This is not preaching peace Jesus. This is Righteous Anger Jesus. This table turning Jesus. This is powerful and purposeful Jesus. **This is JUST Jesus.**

With this action, **“Just Jesus”** seals his own fate. You see, you don’t challenge the economy of the religious power elites and walk away scott free. By raising your voice and people’s consciousness, you become the sacrificial lamb of God. You pay with your life. So we are seeing THE lamb of God – who takes away the sins of the world – setting up his own sacrifice for the life of the world. As he cleanses the temple, his actions create a mindset among his haters – here is our NEW Lamb of God!

At this point, there is a major shift in the tone, the pace, and the purpose of the passage in John’s gospel. **Everything changes in a single moment.** The noise of the busy temple, the raucous righteous anger of Jesus all become still.

All of the sudden, the Gospel writer, John, takes over. He shifts his style, his language and his tone to focus on what he believes this all means.

Quite frankly, the church has spent 2000 years calming good church people by piling up misinterpretations of the text from what follows. We want the whipping, waving Jesus to go away. **Just Jesus** is not good for our image, our publicity, our church growth efforts. John helps us neutralize Jesus.

First, the disciples respond as they try to make sense of **Just Jesus** by turning to an ancient text from Psalm 69:9 to reveal that there is “zeal” in Jesus in this temple scene. The Jewish leaders respond by questioning Jesus’ actions and his radical closing words, which will later be used to charge him with crimes punishable by death on the cross. *“Destroy this temple,”* he says, *“and in three days I will raise it up”* (v. 19).

Then as the crowd responds in understandable confusion – and almost with absence of meaning, John steps into the scene. Remember, John is the “Beloved Disciple,” so called by himself. More fully present than he has been up to this point, John offers the final interpretation in the text. From his unique interpretive posture, he looks backward from the crucifixion and the resurrection that have yet to come, and he offers a strange new interpretation in strangely matter-of-fact terms: *“But he was speaking of the temple of his body.”*

To me, this feels like a scene from a movie where everything freezes. You know what I mean. You see feathers flying, money flying, cattle stampeding, sheep running every direction, vendors chasing their animals and money changers trying to pick-up all the coins they can. All – FROZEN! Even Jesus is frozen with a whip raised over his head about to hit something or someone. Everything is frozen – but the frozen frame looks like pandemonium.

Into the Frozen scene steps John. He is the only one moving and speaking. It all feels so weird. It feels to me like John doesn’t know what to do with Jesus’ righteous anger. He acknowledges what happened. But, to give it

“real meaning,” he wants to spiritualize it. Much has been said about this interpretive moment, about the shift from the temple to Christ’s body, about the surety that distinguishes John’s words from the scene that precedes this.

The radical thrower of tables, the whipper of all that is wrong, the righteous and angry “Word Made Flesh” dwelling among us “full of grace and truth” becomes – before our eyes – the sacrificial lamb of God. We need to spend some more time listening to other people interpret Righteous Anger. Let’s hear what present day table turning women have said about Jesus’ Righteous anger.

### **Instead of spiritualizing, let us contextualize.**

Let’s make this story our own. So John, are you listening? In honor of Women’s History month, we are moving three powerful Black women into our freeze frame to replace you.

“Black woman warrior poet” Audre Lorde is the first to replace you. Audre shared her context and connected with Jesus’ anger in the temple 43 years ago, in a lecture about Women responding to Racism, Audre Lorde said,

*“My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life. Once I did it in silence, afraid of the weight. My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing, so face it and use it fearlessly”*  
(from “*The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism*,” Audre Lorde. 1981).

Now, let’s add Dr. Brittany Cooper to our Freeze Frame. In her powerful book, “*Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*,” Dr. Cooper wrote:

*“Black women have the right to be mad as hell. We have been dreaming of freedom and carving out spaces for liberation since we arrived on these shores. There is no other group, save Indigenous women, who knows and understands*

*more fully the soul of the American body politic than Black women, whose reproductive and social labor have made the world what it is today.”*

One more time, insert author Cole Arthur Riley from The Chesterton House Center for Christian Studies at Cornell University into the freeze frame. Ms. Riley delivered this reflection on our table-flipping Savior during the heat of the protests following the murder of George Floyd on July 29, 2020:

*“We fear that to allow for anger is to become less like you (Jesus). (so) let us meet the God of the prophets. For you tell the truth. You hold fury at injustice. You, in embodied anger, flipped the temple tables. Would you help us to become faithful discerners of when to calm and when to rouse? Rejecting that anger which leads to bitterness or hatred of another, yet tapping into a righteous rage when that which you’ve created is under abuse and neglect. The dignity of creation demands our emotions. Make ours a beautiful rage” (Cole Arthur Riley, @blackliturgies).*

### **Make ours a beautiful rage.**

Listening to my African American sisters, I feel the power of beautiful rage and righteousness come together. It is as though Audre, Brittany and Cole were by Jesus’ side as he was whipping his way through the temple and unleashing the spirit of God with Holy Passover Power.

Jesus was fed up. He was finished. He could no longer abide in the separation of love and justice. In the spirit of justice, he was seeking to give back to the poor – give them back their money, their dignity, their real faith and their true love for God. In the spirit of love, he was defending and protecting those among whom he had lived, ministered, healed, taught, and preached. He couldn’t watch them lose any more. He couldn’t bear to witness his Father’s House, or his beloved siblings being used and abused by thieves and charlatans who were operating in the safe shelter of an abusive religious temple system.

It was out of love and protection – growing from his heart of justice for all – that Jesus righteously raged in the temple that morning. Love and justice

always need to be hand in hand as people are empowered to make change in this world.

Enter one last righteous witness into our freeze frame in the temple – The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of the connections of love and justice when he said: *“Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”* Amen!

We are followers of the Raging, Righteous, whip-snapping Son of a Carpenter, Son of God, and Savior of the World. His image is in your hands right now. He is in our sanctuary every Sunday looking at us. So, let’s look at him. Look in his eyes. Really see the eyes of Jesus. See what he saw that day. With his eyes of love and justice, see what hurts and harms people. Through the eyes of Jesus – see why he was raging. It should make us rage, too. He saw that economic injustice needed to end! He saw poverty needed to end! He saw abuse needed to end! Today he sees the same – and he sees that racism, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, misogyny and mistreatment of people is tearing us apart and needs to end.

So, in our freeze frame – see his eyes. See the whip in his hands. Now, be his eyes and be his hands – clenched with a whip and pointing the exit to the abusers. Through his eyes and through the power in his hands, become table turners, too.

**Let’s really turn the tables, too.** Using the eyes and the hands of Jesus in our world – let us love the people who others call loveless and whom they treat terribly. Let us confront what is wrong and do what is right. Let us protect and serve those who are not protected and served by policing policies, procedures and behaviors that hurt and kill our Black and Brown siblings at alarming rates. Let us defend every American’s basic rights to work, food, safe and affordable housing, medical care and education.

Yesterday, on the westside of the Ohio Statehouse, hundreds (and 10 from First Church) joined in solidarity with the Poor People's Campaign. We listened to many women and men speaking out of their experience with poverty. Did you know we have 140 Million Americans living below the poverty level? Today alone, 800 Americans will die in poverty. Poverty is the 4th leading cause of death in America. And there are 85 Million poor and low income eligible voters who need to be registered. We have work to do outside this sanctuary to right these wrongs. We have to **depart – not just to serve – but to do justice.**

While charity is always needed to alleviate the effects of injustice, let us – as table turners – work for justice which eliminates the causes of injustice. As we do the work of love and justice, we need to know, justice will make us unpopular at times. **As I have said, “prophets are not always the easiest people to get along with, but neither are non-prophets.”**

Doing justice work might make us uncomfortable because justice leads to confrontation while charity never really affects or challenges the status quo. We need to create a world where no one goes hungry and has to hunt for help every day because people have a livable wage, a good job and a place to call home. They don't need food pantries and free lunches at homeless shelters because they are nourished already.

I pray today – that God will make ours a beautiful rage. As we come to Christ's table of grace – which has not been turned over – to receive the gift of life, love and justice from our table turning Savior, I pray we receive food for our journey to justice. Amen



