



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, *Rector*

It Just Flew All Over Him

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 8, 2015
The Third Sunday in Lent: Based on John 2:13-22*

Yesterday was my mother's 97th birthday. As is often the case, living as long as she has is a mixed blessing; but it is a blessing. The way she expresses herself is one of the many things she has given us over the years, often in the form of a Southern idiom that would require some unpacking for you Northern folk. Bless your hearts. For example, in her telling of the story of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, she would have said, "Honey, when Jesus arrived at the temple that day, something just flew all over him." And though I could not tell you then, nor can I now, the etymology of that phrase, I knew well what she meant: Jesus was mad as hops and wasn't taking it any more. I knew because I had been around on an occasion or two when "something flew all over her"! It didn't occur frequently and as far as I know she never overturned any tables; but when something airborne or otherwise made Mother that unhappy, it was best to take cover, for nobody was going to be happy for a while.

And so I read this famous account of Jesus' anger, told in each of the gospels, with a smile and the sweet memory of earlier days with Mother. In the arc of Jesus' life, the story is a great relief to me. Its departure from the beatific, meek and mild Jesus so often presented makes him much more multi-dimensional and real, less insipid than some of our less nuanced images of him suggest. My guess is that Jesus was angry much more often than this single story suggests, for there was much about which to be angry. Though imagining rage as the default position for the Prince of Peace might unsettle us, it would be to miss a great opportunity not to learn about what made him so angry.

Devoutly Jewish in every way, Jesus' understanding of who he was in the world was shaped by his love of the Torah and his immersion in the life and worship of the temple. His rage was not a reaction to the tradition of his birth but to the way it had developed. As has often been true of religious authorities, the leaders of the Jews—almost surely in the beginning out of the best of intentions—developed over many centuries an elaborate and life-taking system of declaring some things pure and some things impure. Although the tradition itself had called the people of God again and again—just as it does us—to a spirituality of the interior, a spirituality of the heart, the emphasis in the *practice* of the faith had shifted to determining who was outwardly worthy or pure and who was not. No one escaped the grip of this choking purity system—one attribute good, the other bad: male, female; rich, poor; healthy, unhealthy; Jew, Gentile, and on and on.

Even the system of worship bore the mark of this overarching purity system. Animal sacrifice in worship was standard practice in Judaism; and though it is barbarous to us, it was an improvement over an earlier time when human sacrifice was a part of the effort to appease God. The animals, which were sold in the courtyard, were to be used for sacrifice in the liturgy of the temple to make the worshipper pure before God. Of course, the animals had to be purchased. The poor peasant who wanted to worship but who could not afford to purchase an animal to be sacrificed was barred from entering the temple. Poor people were already considered less than pure *because* they were poor; and, yet, they were denied the privilege of worship, which would have made them purer; so they became even more defiled because they did not follow the rule of worship. It was a ludicrous circle of defeat for all but the very privileged. If the cost of the sacrificial animal were not enough, it got even more complicated. Since Roman coins were considered impure, Roman money had to be changed to temple money to purchase the sacrifices. Of course, a fee was charged for changing the money. So even if the poor were able to scrape together enough to buy a lamb to be sacrificed, they might get to the gate and not have enough for the animal and the bank fee!

It was this viciously unfair system that “flew all over Jesus” that famous day in the temple. His extraordinary reaction tells us a great deal about him and his passion and gives us, I think, a glimpse into the heart of God. For him to witness the most vulnerable of God’s children being held from the holiest place on earth was unbearable, and to see it being done at the hand of those set apart as leaders in the community of faith in the name of God made it all the more enraging.

It is a great story, but the danger for us in hearing it is that it could make us a little self-righteous. We feel good, I think appropriately, about the fact that we do not create many barriers to keep people out; we are genuinely open and inclusive. I do, however, honestly wonder if some of our liberality might stop just short of warmly welcoming those who would want us to change much, which is to say anything, about the way we worship; but generally we do indeed get high marks on the radical welcome. But in the story there remains a significant Lenten challenge for me and, I suspect, for you. Perhaps it is asking us to question what it is that makes us angry. Now to be sure, lest the numerous therapists in the room rise up to oppose, being able to feel and express anger is crucial to living fully and well. In my opinion, most of us New Yorkers seem to have this down pretty well.

But if Jesus’ anger about this issue, as I have claimed, tells us something profound about him, what do the things that make us angry tell us about ourselves? Speaking only for myself, an honest look at some of the things that make me angry is a sobering observation. The things that Jesus got angry about got him killed. That is not likely to be true for me. Obsessing about the things that generally make me angry could shorten my life, I suppose, or more likely simply make it much less joyful. It breaks my heart to admit the moments of joy I have lost by being mad about some imagined—or real—slighting from this person or that one, by living in angry turmoil from jealousy or envy, or by fuming over a late plane or bad traffic or something not working just as I think it should. In retrospect that kind of anger seems such a hideous waste of my life. I expect I am not alone in this.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if this story of Jesus’ righteous anger could set us straight on the things about which we should be so angry? On the most selfish level, it might add years to our lives and without a doubt would make them better, if not longer. But beyond that, it could empower us to change the world. Fifty years ago yesterday, a day known now as Bloody Sunday, Martin Luther King, Jr. led a group of persons seeking justice and fairness as they attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery. Their righteous anger met a bad end that day; but they lived to try again and in time they made it to Montgomery, winning a battle in a war that continues.

How much of our anger is righteous? How much of it is about something that truly matters? To be sure there are pitfalls in righteous anger, and we won’t always get it right. The big risk is that we shall become insufferably *self*-righteous. I’ve been there. But upon reflection I would rather err in the direction of getting on my high horse about some issue that I truly care about than simply dribbling my life and energy away being angry about things that are totally unimportant. For me, it is worth thinking about.

In the name of God: *Amen*.