

John 2:13-22

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making 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. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” ¹⁹Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After 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.

Pray: O God of love and grace, O God of peace and justice, O God who comforts, encourages, and challenges, we thank you. We praise you. We ask your Holy Spirit to come upon us, to turn our anxiousness, our restlessness, even our anger into something you can use, to motivate us to build up your Kingdom, to do your work, to step out in faith with boldness, even when the path is difficult. O God, be present in the speaking, the hearing, and the living of your Holy Word. Amen.

Sue LeBrun-Green remembers the May 1980 day well. Authorities called her real estate office searching for her friend and colleague Candy Lightner. The news was tragic. A hit-and-run driver had struck Candy’s 13-year-old daughter Cari while she was walking to a church carnival.

Knocked out of her shoes, Cari landed 125 feet away. She died never knowing what hit her. The hit-and-run driver was turned in by his wife, who was suspicious at his efforts to hide their badly damaged car.

A couple of days later Candy called and said, “Sue, we just found out the driver was drunk.”

Can you imagine the grief, the outrage, perhaps even the anger at finding out your 13 year old daughter’s life had tragically been taken from her by a drunk driver?

And yet, God helped to turn the anger of a distressed, grief-stricken, outraged mother into a zeal for the Lord and for a cause to end drunk driving and save lives. Over twenty-five years ago, a heartbroken mother made a pledge in her deceased daughter’s bedroom. She would do something about the outrage of drunk driving—a decision that quickly inspired a handful of grieving, determined mothers to join in the fight. Though united in cause, they had no office, no money and no clout. In fact, all they had was sorrow, determination, and a picture of a pretty, 13-year-old girl killed by a drunk driver. Yet they initiated one of the greatest grass-roots movements of grace and justice this nation has seen, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, which has saved hundreds of thousands of lives.

As their fledgling organization grew, they stood toe to toe with politicians who knew the stats but did not act. They took on a powerful industry that put profit over safety. They challenged a society that viewed drinking and driving as acceptable—even laughable. And they

caused a visceral reaction. The getting there wasn't easy. It was tough. It was messy. And it was fraught with obstacles. Yet MADD proved, time and time again, that it would not be bullied or derailed. In fact, MADD blazed a trail that other organizations have since followed. They made hard, cold statistics come to life. They did not just say that drunk driving killed thousands and injured millions. They held up photographs—and described every nuance of their loved ones' lives—to prove it. As a result, a mountain of traffic safety and victims' rights legislation has been passed. Annual alcohol-related traffic fatalities have dropped dramatically. And, perhaps most important, society no longer views drunk-driving as acceptable.

That comes from the Mothers Against Drunk Driving website and the history of their organization.

From Anger to Zeal. From Anger to Zeal.

This morning, we have the classic story of the cleansing of the temple. That time, when overtaken by zeal and consumed by passion, Jesus pours out the coins of the money changers, drives out the doves and sheep and other animals used for sacrifices, and overturns the tables. The story is told in all four Gospels, although the other accounts have this scene happening towards the end of Jesus' ministry, after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. But not so in John. In John, this is the first thing Jesus does after changing the water to wine at the wedding in Cana. This is how Jesus starts his ministry, starts by making a scene, starts by causing such a ruckus that the scribes and Pharisees and other religious leaders can't help but notice this man from Galilee.

By starting off with this episode, John sets the tone of the story. We see that for one thing, Jesus stands against the religious establishment of his day. He sees how their faith in God has been twisted and bent to serve not God, but their own needs. And like the prophets of old who testified against injustice and how the people had misunderstood what God had intended, Jesus is calling the people to realize what God really wants.

I mean, you have to understand. It was the time of Passover. Many people, many very devout Jews, would make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to visit the temple. There, they would bring animals for sacrifice to their God, trinkets and grains to offer to their Lord. But you see, Jesus did not like what he saw in the outskirts of the temple grounds, where merchants peddled their goods, selling all sorts of things required for sacrifice. And Jesus got mad, got angry at what was happening, but he turned his anger, his outrage, that feeling in his gut that things just were not right and turned it into something that brought about justice and positive change. Jesus turned his anger into zeal, the kind of zeal brought by God, a zeal for righting the wrongs of this world and working for something better, the kind of zeal that can only come from our Holy Lord.

From anger to zeal. From anger to zeal.

There are times in our lives, my friends, when we get angry, angry about what goes on in this world. Or maybe anger is not the best word. Yes, sometimes there is anger, but often it is a kind of restlessness, anxiousness, a feeling in your gut that things are just not right. But the key, my friends, is to let God turn that anger into zeal for the Lord, to turn that restlessness into a willingness to act, to turn that anxiousness into doing something that can bring about a change, a transformation, an improvement in this world, in our lives.

If you are open to the Holy Spirit, God can turn that anger into zeal, funnel all your feelings into a determination, a passion, a purpose—God's purpose.

So often in our lives, we become so passive. With so many bad reports in the news, murders and rapes and abuse, it's like we have become anesthetized to the problems of our

world. From Darfur to Rwanda to the poverty in Africa and around the world, the sex trafficking in Southeast Asia, the AIDS, the drunk-driving, the hopelessness.

This week, Jan and I went to see *Slumdog Millionaire*. It was really good, but I want to warn you, it was pretty brutal at first, to see what these poor people go through over there in India. It makes you realize how lucky we are to live in this nation; I guarantee it. But you see the violence, the cruelty, the discrimination, the abject poverty, and you wonder, is it really like that? I kept thinking to myself, “yeah, it probably is.”

But then, with so much violence on the news, in the shows we watch, from 24 to CSI, the video games we play—all this violence in our midst somehow deadens our souls to the outrage we should be feeling over all of this. And in all these shows, how do you stop violence, injustice, cruelty? You use violence.

Jesus taught us a different way, walked a different path, and told us to do the same. That’s what last week’s sermon was all about, about picking up crosses, strapping them to your back, and doing what must be done, knowing that it will cost you. That’s what discipleship is, and it is the path that leads to life.

From Anger to Zeal.

Is there anything in this world that makes you angry? Makes you restless? You see something on the TV, something at work, read something in the paper or witness something in public, and it makes you mad, makes you think, “What is this world coming to?”

God can use that anger and funnel it into something positive. God allows you to get mad in these instances so that you will be motivated, not to just throw up your hands and get depressed; give up hope. It’s the devil who tells you, you can’t make a difference. Jesus sings a different tune. God wants you to turn that anger into zeal, to take all that crap, even the horrible things that you go through and turn it into something good, something beautiful, something that rights the wrongs of this world.

But you got to let God in on this journey. You have to let Him be the one who guides your steps, your words, your actions. Jesus may have caused a ruckus, confronted his critics, and challenged his followers, but he always did it with love, because he loves all of us, all of us, and if anything God holds a special place in Her heart for those most in need of hope.

Many are familiar with the serenity prayer, at least the first part: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 step programs have made it a central theme to a person’s recovery. The prayer was written by Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the greatest American theologians. He taught at Eden Seminary, the same place every settled pastor of this church has attended except one. (I think he attended Eden as well, not sure). That’s right. Reinhold Niebuhr belongs to the history of the United Church of Christ.

Here is the prayer in full: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardship as the pathway to peace. Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it. Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen.

My friends, God can turn our anger into zeal, turn our anxiousness into the God-given hope that moves us to work for a better world, turn our restlessness into the kind of faith that can move mountains. God can do this for us, if we let Him, if we surrender to His will. Amen.