

Sermon: June 10, 2012 -- by Rev. Cathy Hird

The thing that struck me about the story Mark tells us is how angry Jesus got at the Pharisees. Their hardness of heart makes him deeply angry.

It occurred to me that this is the only kind of situation that made Jesus angry. He did not get angry at stuff you and I would get angry about. He got angry at the temple when he saw how supposedly religious people were getting in the way of folks who wanted to come to God, were making money rather than helping people gain access to the house of God.

Jesus did not get angry when the disciples shoed the children away; he taught them to welcome all. He did not get angry when the disciples did not think they could feed the crowd; he showed them they could. He did not even get angry at Judas; he sadly showed him the evil he was doing.

So there is a lesson about appropriate anger in this story. We speak of “righteous indignation” as the proper reaction to things that are wrong in the world, and we might use that phrase for this story, but let us look more closely, because the times Jesus did not get angry, the night he was betrayed for example, could have generated something called righteous indignation. He was more careful with his anger than that.

The first lesson that came to me from this passage is about spillage. When we are angry, we don't always just direct it at the person we are angry at. It comes out and hits whoever is handy. By showing the story, I became very aware of this—turning from the Pharisees to the man with the withered hand, I was aware that Jesus moved from anger to compassion. He kept his anger where it belonged and treated the victim with compassion.

We can see ourselves in that situation. It is hard to be disciplined about our anger. So I want to invite you for a moment to think about what makes you angry.

When someone hurts us—insults us or physically injures us—we get angry. When someone gets in our way, stops us from carrying through what we want or need to do, we get angry. When someone puts themselves ahead of us, we get angry.

But would Jesus get angry if someone stepped into line ahead of him in the grocery store? From the stories we are told, I don't think so. He might put his hand on their shoulder and ask why they are in such a hurry. He might invite them into a conversation; ask what is on their mind.

We get angry when people push ahead of us. And if Jesus was there, he might put his hand on our shoulder and ask us why that made us angry, why we are in such a hurry, why we care so much about politeness. He might point out all the reasons we should have compassion on the person who jumped ahead of us.

What about when someone hurts us? It is so natural to be angry when someone does wrong and hurts us. But in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, turn the other cheek. Picture him in the garden with Judas. He stands strong and faces Judas. He makes Judas see what he is doing; "you would betray the son of man with a kiss." He gives Judas the opportunity to do something different than he has planned. He does not fight back. Jesus modeled non-violent resistance for us, showed us how to be strong but not angry so that we confront what is wrong but do not do wrong ourselves.

What about when someone gets in our way? How do we react when someone stops us from doing what we want to do? A diversity trainer that I met in my work with the national church talks about "teaching moments." When our committee talked about how to respond to an article in Mandate that deeply disturbed her, she said, "We don't want them to just edit out the racism; that makes it invisible. We want them to show it as wrong and show the alternative."

Jesus took every moment as a teaching moment. He could have gotten angry at the disciples when they did not welcome the children. "You've been with me this long, and still don't get it! I give up on you," he could have said and did not. Instead, he took one of the rejected children and drew him into the circle and showed the disciples the action he expected. Anger would have further disturbed the children of Salem, would have dismissed and injured the disciples. Instead, Jesus cares for both and honours the disciples by teaching them.

So what is so different about the Pharisees? Why do they rate Jesus' anger?

First, the Pharisees claim to be righteous, to be teachers, to be the ones who help the people find God.

Unlike the Sadducees and the priests who serve at the temple and have to manage the purity laws, the Pharisees are out in the community. They have the goal of making God accessible to the people. They established the synagogues out in the villages. They claim to be helping people into God's presence. In fact, the way they enforce the rules they made up, they keep people out of the presence of God.

This is profound hypocrisy. This is betraying what you claim to believe. Jesus challenges them to walk the talk, to live what they say they believe.

Second, the Pharisees have power. They make the rules so that they have the ability to change them. They interpret the laws so they can either interpret the laws in a way that makes it easy for people to follow them or hard. And Jesus has seen that sometimes they interpret the laws in a way that is to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of the people. For example, there are rules about grain and its contact with water. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees interpreted that to mean that Egyptian grain was not Kosher because of the way they use irrigation. Egyptian grain was often cheaper and always more reliable than local grain because of the access to water. So the way the Pharisees interpreted this law meant real hardship for the people. And because they were landowners, the ones who produced local grain, they benefited by this interpretation.

And it was their interpretation of other laws about loaning money and buying land that got them the land in the first place. In the society of Galilee, they have wealth and they have wealth in part because of the way they interpret the law. They could use their wealth to help people, but they choose to help themselves instead. And in the process they are doing real harm to other people.

This is what makes Jesus angry. This is why he asks them, is it right to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath? He has seen the harm they do so as they challenge him, as they try to keep him from doing good, he pushes back. Doing harm in God's name is what makes him angry. Using their power to hurt people rather than to help them makes him angry.

The Pharisees have the ability to do things differently, and they know the difference between right and wrong. They teach the difference between right and wrong. Knowledge and power give them responsibility. They could help and choose not to. This makes them responsible for their actions.

Faced with Jesus' anger, this group of Pharisees leave and begin to plan for Jesus' death. They choose not to do things his way. They choose not to give up their power or their wealth. Faced with his righteous anger, they get angry in turn. And in time, they will act on their anger.

This story in Mark has several lessons for us. It reminds us that rules are designed to help people along their way not block them. It reminds us that religious practice needs to be moderated by the needs of people not by what feels proper. It reminds us that power—power that comes with knowledge and access to money—gives us responsibility; we need to use our money and our knowledge to help people. And there is a message about anger, about the appropriate place of anger.

It is easy to justify ourselves when we get angry. And in some very few places, anger is appropriate. But let us remember how seldom Jesus got angry and as we walk in his path may we be more disciplined with our anger.