

“Mad Enough to Spit”

John 2:13-22

A sermon preached by Bob Bardin at First Presbyterian Church, Goldsboro  
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You ever been mad enough to spit?

I don't mean politely mad... raise your voice slightly, narrow your eyes, knit your brow, purse your lips kind of mad....

I mean bulging eyed, blood-boiling, ranting, raving, raging mad.

When I walked out of the historic Oriental Theater in Milwaukee into the warm summer dusk, I was feeling so good.

My tummy was full of an early supper of large popcorn with real melted butter, my heart full with the sweet sadness of the Pixar movie, 'Up,'.

It takes a minute to get your bearings when you come out of a movie, doesn't it....especially when you go in in the daylight and come out into the night.

The noise of traffic on Farwell Ave. was a bit of a shock...but the greater shock was waiting for me at the intersection just to the NE.

A group of Christians had gathered on two of the four corners of the busy intersection to catch people coming and going...I could tell they were Christians....I could see the cross on their signs.

One held a megaphone, and were using it to broadcast a message that was repeated on their signs.

It was not a message of good news, but bad.

Words like “abomination” and “hell” and “repent” rang out in the air and on the signs.

It took a few seconds for me to gather it all in.

The group was consigning all gay people to hell, unless they repented.

Instantaneously, both the content of the message and method of delivering it....shouting....stuck a hot poker in my adrenal glands.

The sweetness of the movie “Up” forgotten, the only thing up was the dander released from my amygdala deep in my brain...up, up, up it went, into the red line...warning...warning....danger...danger.

They tell me that there's a part of your brain right here above your left eye, in your frontal lobe, that goes into overdrive when your dander redlines.

It's called the “calm down and don't throw that vase” lobe. That's the technical name.

It did it's job that night.....until....until....

Some jostling on the occupied street corner between the shouters and the shouted-at knocked down an elderly woman who had just crossed the street with her husband...holding hands, on their way back to their car after seeing the movie UP.

By the time I could cross the street, she **was** up, apparently OK....

But I wasn't....OK, I mean....

Flight surrendered to fight; split to spit.

I was Will Ferrell's Ricky Bobby on fire at the racetrack out of control.

I have a penchant for memorizing scripture, and it came in handy just then.

Matthew 23...

I invaded the megaphone holder's personal space and bathed his face with buttery popcorn breath and spit out fire.

**“Woe to you, you hypocrites!**

**You have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness.**

**You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.**

**“Woe to you, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean..... you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.**

**“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”**

The maddest I've ever been....

You ever been that mad...mad enough to spit?

Jesus could get mad now....he could get mad like that.

We don't usually think of Jesus with a red face of rage.....more likely “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” as the hymn says, or at least Jesus in control, even keeled, never perturbed.

If there's a member of the Trinity who's got the reputation for anger issues, it would be God the Father, right? Or the Old Testament God, who, according to conventional wisdom, is the God of vengeance and wrath.

There are many people, including some in this room, who have a hard time picturing God as anything but that, anything other than the worst

kind of cosmic Chicago cop, swinging a baton, and eager for a chance to use it at the slightest provocation or misstep.

That's not right.....that's not right....but it's what too many people believe.

Who thinks of an angry Jesus, though?  
We're not used to this angry Jesus.

But he could get mad, too, and did.

He got spitting mad when the disciples tried to run off as a nuisance the gang of children who stood round his knee and fancied his blessing.

Oh....he was mad.

“DON'T YOU **EVER** KEEP THE CHILDREN FROM COMING TO ME!!”

And anger flashed in his eyes once when the Pharisees criticized him for healing a man with a shriveled up hand on the Sabbath.

They followed him into church....to see what Jesus was going to do....to try to trap him into breaking the law.

He called the suffering man to him...and said to his accusers..."You tell me...is the Sabbath a day to save life or destroy life?"

They didn't answer...just stared icily.

Jesus, the gospel says, glared right back at them in defiant anger...."Hold out your hand..." he said to the man....

His hand was free....

The stony faces around rushed off to plan an execution.

They constantly hounded Jesus and his followers, accusing him of breaking the law and encouraging others to, too.

And it built up and built up in him, until the last week of his life, when he finally let them have it, spitting and spraying in fury at their hypocrisy...furnishing me the words for my street corner sermonette.

Jesus got mad at Peter, his disciple....remember?

Peter had just confessed him....."You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

"Right Peter!" And because I am the Christ, I am going to suffer, to surrender to these who hate me, and be crucified."

"NO WAY" Peter said....yanking Jesus around to face him.

Jesus' face blazed, and he spit out,"GET BEHIND ME SATAN."

And then there is our text today... a time when Jesus really got mad, eyes bulging and blazing, twirled together a whip like a rat tail gym towel and gave his amygdala and adrenal glands free reign....

The time when Jesus went off and went after a church-full of people.....spitting anger, spilling money, steamrolling tables, setting loose a swarm of animals...

What is it, do you think, that made Jesus so mad that day?

Growing up, I always heard that what set Jesus off was something about selling things in church, and that's why good Presbyterians didn't do that, but the Catholics with their bingo and raffles were really going to get it.

To this day we Presbyterian types, particularly in the south have this wariness of fundraisers.

But surely there's something more than a raffle that prompts Jesus' rage.

It could be that Jesus was mad because the Passover pilgrims, particularly the poor ones, were being cheated and taken advantage of.....that's what enraged Jesus.

According to the sacrificial system, pilgrims to the Temple had to offer an unblemished lamb. Those too poor to afford a lamb could offer doves.

Rather than try to bring animals cross country, many bought them at the temple where merchants....allotted a place by Temple authorities (kickbacks encouraged!) provided them...just as Disneyworld "provides" drinks, at three times the cost outside the walls.

The Roman currency peasants arrived with was considered unclean by the Temple law, and in order to buy a sacrificial animal, a pilgrim had to change his Roman money for Temple coins....

Again, there were moneychangers conveniently located there for that purpose, (kickbacks encouraged) who charged exorbitant fees to change the money.

This was the system....corrupt, criminal, and unavoidable.

Should a peasant try to bring an animal from home, they found that they had to be checked at the gate, inspected by temple authorities, who could be counted on to find some imperfection that would render the animal invalid....unless, perhaps, there was a bribe paid.

So it could be that Jesus was raging over this injustice toward the poor....

There's no doubt that injustice to the poor makes God angry.....read the prophets Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah...

and in the three accounts of Jesus cleansing the temple in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus says, "You have turned my Father's house into a den of thieves."

But in our gospel reading from John, Jesus is enraged not by shady, corrupt commerce, but by commerce itself....

"You have taken my Father's house and turned it into a marketplace, or as Ann read it, "a shopping mall."

Could it be that what angered Jesus was that faith had become nothing more than a transaction....I come to the Temple, I offer my sacrifice, I pay my dues, and I'm good with God...check that off...Could it be that what really makes Jesus mad is when empty ritual becomes an end in itself, and love is nowhere to be found.

Now we're getting close to home, aren't we?

What really bothered Jesus was.....people going through the motions...Call to worship, hymn of praise...prayer of confession, assurance of forgiveness...anthem...children's sermon, offering, peace passing, as a kind of transaction....our good deed...I've done my part, I've given you my hour....now you do your part, God.

But Jesus really gets mad when love is missing....from our worship, missing from our serving.

You remember that time when

"One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup> you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' <sup>31</sup> The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." <sup>32</sup> Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you

have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other';<sup>33</sup> and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' — **this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.**"<sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

What made Jesus mad at his disciples, pushing the children away, for efficiency's sake, is that it is so unloving.

What made Jesus furious at the Pharisees tisk tisking him for a Sabbath healing is that it was so unloving toward the man whose hand is hideously and painfully withered....attentive to the details of the law but oblivious to the heart of the law.

What made Jesus enraged at Peter is that he tried to make survival the highest goal...not loving surrender.

What enraged Jesus about the Milwaukee street preachers is that their message was so unlike him because it is was so unloving...

And...and.....what enraged Jesus about my righteous, spitting anger that night, is that while I preached, I hated....I hated....

Even as I quoted his own words I had so carefully memorized, I hated....and I was so far away from him.

Looking back on that night, I wonder if, of all the people on that corner, I was the furthest from his kingdom.

As I walked back to my car, licking my chops and savoring that feast of a fight, I wonder if the dizziness in my head, my trembling hands and the pit in my stomach were not from an adrenalin hangover but from the Spirit of Jesus turning over, topsy-turvy, the table over my loveless assault.

There's lots of shouting in our world today.

Lots of people on differing sides, red-faced with bulging eyes, sure that their anger is right and righteous, co-opting Jesus to prove it so.

But could it be that what really gets Jesus' dander up is not our causes but too little love....for God, for each other, even for our enemies?