Honouring God’s Presence

March 7, 2021 Lent III

John 2: 13-22 Russell Mitchell-Walker

When have you experienced or seen an expression of righteous anger? We might think of the Black Lives Matter protests as a group of people who were protesting for the dignity of those who are black, indigenous and people of colour and against police brutality and systemic racism. Presently there are protests in the world in Myanmar, in support of their democratically elected government and against the military coup and farmers in India are protesting the deregulation of wholesale trading and elimination of guaranteed minimum prices for food staples. We might express anger ourselves at situations we find ourselves in or at individuals who upset us. How often do we feel OK about that anger? Being angry and expressing our anger has gotten a bad rap in our culture. There is nothing wrong with being angry. It is a feeling like all of the feelings we have, it is important to accept it. What can be a problem is how we express the anger or if we don’t express it and hold it in, it can be quite unhealthy for us. When you think of Jesus, how much do you think of him being angry? Our images of Jesus have been shaped as one who was gentle, meek, and calm. Yet todays reading reminds us that he was not afraid to express his anger. When we read the gospel stories, we might note that he challenges the religious authorities quite often, and I think there is underlying anger at the injustices he is witnessing in these challenges.

Today’s scripture is the clearest expression of anger we witness of Jesus in the stories we have. He has come into the outer area of the temple, which is part of the temple, where the moneychangers are working and animals are being sold for sacrifices. The area was about the size of two football fields. It was the Passover festival and people would have traveled from far and wide to come to Jerusalem. Thus, they have money from all over. It was the rules of the temple that only shekels could be used to pay the Temple tax, inside the temple. So they needed the moneychangers to exchange their currency. People travelled long distances and were not able to bring their own animals for sacrifice so they purchased them at the temple. Jesus was upset that these transactions were happening in the temple, a place of worship. A sacred place had become a marketplace, where people were making money off of others, and there is some indication that the moneychangers were charging unfair rates to the people. So Jesus was furious and made an angry statement by turning over tables of the moneychangers, chasing out the sheep and cattle and telling the sellers of the doves to take them out of there.

The temple was understood to be the sanctuary of God’s presence, the place where God resided. Thus, it was offensive to be selling and cheating people in the place of God’s presence. Jesus’ statement that he will build up the temple again in three days if they tore it down, is a reference to himself as the temple, begins to create a shift in thinking about God’s presence. God’s presence was in and with Jesus. As the community of the followers of Jesus grew, and following his death and resurrection, Paul’s writings helped develop an understanding that Christ is in us, that we are the Body of Christ and thus God’s presence or God, is in and with each of us. Jesus and his followers are the Temple of God.

This shift in thinking or belief, also means that we don’t need a building, a church, a temple to be in the presence of God. This has become very evident for us during this past year as we moved worship online. While we are no longer in the building to worship, God is still in and with us as we worship. I think we could say that we have all experienced that this past year. Many of us in ministry have said the building has closed but the church is not. This is really important, particularly when there are churches who are challenging the health orders and saying that they need to be able to worship in their buildings and be in person. It seems to me that they are missing Jesus’ message of God’s presence being in him and in us. This might be something that Jesus might be angry about in the church today. What other things about the church might Jesus be enraged about today?

If we are God’s presence, how do we experience that in our lives? How do we honour God presence?

We experience or honour God’s presence when we experience love and care of others. These days this can be a phone call to check in with friends or neighbours, with those who are ill or grieving, with those struggling with mental health issues.

We experience or honour God’s presence when we serve others, or help those in need, who are poor, struggling, or in need of support.

We experience or honour God’s presence when we stand in solidarity with those who are oppressed and marginalized and when we take the time and effort to learn about and understand the issues.

We experience or honour God’s presence when we take care of ourselves by eating well, exercising, getting the rest we need.

We experience or honour God’s presence when we take time for ourselves to pray, meditate, read scripture, or nourish our spiritual journey.

We experience or honour God’s presence when we recognize that we are all in this together, that we are all connected, and what we do impacts others and all of creation.

Jesus was right to be angry and provided us with an example of how to express that anger in an appropriate way. Now some may think that his outburst was violent and extreme. Others think that it was nonviolent as he did not hurt anyone or anything. The key message in the end, is about the shift in thinking about the Temple and God’s presence. God is not in one place or one time, but in everyone and is everywhere. May we live to honour God’s presence in our lives and in one another as we seek to be faithful to Jesus’ message of love, justice, peace, and standing with those in need.