REFLECTION ON ANGER March 4, 2018 (Lent 3)

Oh my!! - An angry Jesus! Can this explosive character who is depicted in the reading we just heard from John's gospel this morning be the same "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" that I heard stories about in Sunday school? I'm not sure why children of my generation were fed this meek and mild (I think today's youth might call it wimpy) image of Jesus. But, since we were supposed to "be" like Jesus or "behave" like Jesus, I can only think that the obedient, passive role model was preferable to that of someone who could rebel against authority by healing on the Sabbath; break the laws of society by inviting tax collectors to join him and then going to eat with them and get angry with his disciples when they tried to shoo the children away **IF** we were living through an age where young children were taught to be "seen and not heard."

But I think it is possible that because I was a young child during the war years, the "nice" stories of Jesus were a comfort zone for both us and our Sunday school teachers.

It could be said that anger is a natural, though sometimes unwanted or irrational, emotion that everybody experiences from time-to-time. I doubt if there is anyone here today who has not been angry or aroused by a perceived injustice. Have you ever felt yourself getting angry over and over again about the same thing and yet doing nothing.

A tragic event occurred earlier this month at a school in the U.S. This was yet another mass shooting at an educational institution. Since the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999, there have been in excess of 16 other shootings in schools or colleges in the U.S. with multiple victims. After

each of these events, voices were raised in protest, but it seemed that little happened and the voices of protest quieted until the next, and the next and the next shootings occurred.

What is different about the recent shootings at Marjory Stoneman school in Florida? I don't have the answer to that but I do believe that the student body, and the students from other schools across the country have suddenly got angry enough that **they** have decided that **their** voices must be heard. Not the voices of the teachers, the school administrators, the state legislators, the Governors, the Senators and the all powerful members of the National Rifle Association, **but the very eloquent voices of the students.**

I heard a recent interview with one of the students who said … "At Marjory Stoneman we don't want to be known at the school where the last shooting took place, **we** want to be known as the **last** school where a shooting took place. We are already reading about changes that some large retailers are making regarding sales of firearms and even more encouraging is the news that companies who do business with the NRA are severing their ties to that frighteningly powerful lobby group. Even if these are just baby steps, they are welcome and the students must believe that they have been heard.

Christian Social Justice advocate Jim Wallis says – …."You can't just keep pulling people's bodies out of the river without sending someone up stream to see what, or who is throwing them in!" Is it possible that in these acts of violence we are seeing the two-edged sword of anger? One, is a violent and destructive reaction that has deep-seated and hidden reasons – mental health, inequality, poverty ……. ….. The other a constructive and non-violent reaction to anger which says loud and clear, we are not going to take this any longer.

I have been going back and forth all week reading the accounts in all four gospels of Jesus going into the Temple. All four make this sound like a truly violent angry action which seems so out of character for Jesus. So, what was the trigger that caused him to react in such a physical way by overturning tables, scattering money and whipping the poor animals out into the street? Surely he had seen this scene before on other visits to the Temple? One New Testament scholar suggests that it was a protest from the legal and prophetic heart of Judaism against Jewish religious co-operation with Roman Imperial control. I'm sure that was part of it, but that is a scholarly reason and I am no biblical scholar.

I found myself wondering if Jesus perhaps saw the Temple itself not as a place where people came expecting to meet God, but as a barrier where they were expected to perform certain rituals and present sacrifices but never really expect to encounter a god who could change lives. When Jesus followed up his violent actions by addressing the Jewish authorities who, understandably, confronted him and suggesting that they "destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" . Of all the possible interpretations of what these words might mean, I personally favour a simple interpretation which focuses on the purification of the temple to its sacred purpose as a place of prayer for all people, without manipulation or exploitation by the religious gatekeepers.

I recently read a book by an author I think may become one of my new favourite mystery writers. In it the main character is walking down the street where he'd lived and been raised by his grandmother. One passage really grabbed me and I read it over and over ….

"He'd walked the street countess times in his life; knew all the buildings, the trees, the positions of the street lamps. He knew the church too, its dark stained stone, squat tower and arched windows. He'd never attended a service in there; his grandmother had been a devout atheist all her life, and something of that had rubbed off on him. True, recent experience had given him cause to re-evaluate some of the sweeping generalizations he'd made growing up, but all the same he was confident that the God represented by that building did not exist."

Here at Esquimalt United we like to think that we present a welcoming and friendly atmosphere to all comers and we are delighted to hear from visitors and newcomers that we are indeed welcoming. But, you have to come through the door to experience that welcome. What are some of the tables that we might just have to stand aside and let Jesus overturn. What cobwebs need sweeping away so that visitors, newcomers and even curious church shoppers might say, yes that church on the corner is not only a welcoming and friendly place to enter but that it is also a place where I might just have an encounter with a transforming Holy presence.
The church that many of us have grown up with is changing. Are we ready to have our temple walls knocked down?

Amen