

Last weekend, I had the pleasure of throwing my husband a surprise birthday party. I don't think Matt's watching online, but just in case, I won't say which birthday we celebrated. Let's just say it was a milestone birthday, somewhere between 59 and 61.

The day after the party, Matt and I were looking at pictures and exchanging stories about the event. And he shared with me a conversation he had with one of the servers at the party. I'd met this young woman early in the evening; I could tell she was about my daughter's age. She was pleasant and helpful, and I thanked her for taking care of us. And that was the extent of our conversation.

Matt, on the other hand, experienced a very different encounter. It started when he asked if she had to be back at the restaurant the next morning, and she said, "Oh no. Tomorrow's Sunday; I never work on Sunday because of church."

She shared that she attended a local non-denominational Christian church, and my husband said, "Oh, did you know my wife is a Deacon? That's an ordained minister in the Episcopal Church." To which the young woman responded, "Well I think that's wrong. Women should not be allowed to be in leadership positions in the Church."

My husband and a friend who'd been part of this conversation—also a man—at some point picked their jaws up off the floor. They'd never heard someone of her generation, at least not in Howard County Maryland, express such views. When they asked her age, she said 21.

The young woman went on to confidently express how everyone is subservient to God. And everyone has their place in the order beneath that, so to speak. And according to the Bible, women are to be subservient to men.

My husband says that moment felt like a crossroads to him. Clearly, she felt strongly about the topic, and it wasn't his place to convince her otherwise. So, he said the one thing that came to his mind at that moment. He told her, "Well, I think someday you're going to make some man very happy."

Matt thought their talk would end there. But then she shared one more thing. She said, "You know what else I think? I think we should be afraid of God."

She went on to quote Proverbs 9 about how the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom—so yes, we should all be afraid of God. Matt wanted to hear more, but other people began to show up to get drinks, and the conversation ended there.

"We should be afraid of God." Despite the surprises of that story, this is the part I find most remarkable. That this young woman, just 21 years old, relates to the Divine through fear.

I spent some time thinking about how her faith community may have shaped her views, and how different those are from our Episcopal teachings—not only about the role of women but in the beliefs around fear.

Fearing God is not something we Episcopalians focus on much. In fact, if anything, I think we tend to downplay the moments in Scripture where we encounter God's anger or judgement.

Think about this morning's readings. We begin with the many "shall nots" of the 10 commandments in Exodus, from the very mouth of God, who declares himself a "jealous God," one who punishes children for the iniquity of parents, "to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject him."

We close with John's Gospel recalling a rare display of Jesus's anger: the cleansing of the temple. Let's step back into that scene for a moment.

It is nearly time for Passover, the high holy celebration of the Hebrews' liberation from slavery in Egypt. As is custom, Jesus goes to worship in Jerusalem, along with throngs of other Jews from near and far. When he enters the temple, he takes in the sight of the money changers seated at tables, beside cattle and sheep and doves for sale.

A distressed Jesus makes a whip out of cords and begins lashing it about, upending baskets of money, overturning tables, driving out people and animals, shouting, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" In the chaos, the disciples watch in disbelief—they have not seen their beloved Teacher behave this way before. Then they remember that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

From a jealous, punishing God, to an enraged, seemingly violent Jesus, I wonder: If I were new to church and just walked in the door and heard today's readings, what would I think? Would I be enticed to return next Sunday?

In a world filled with fear and anger, people are yearning for a different message. When I became a Christian at the age of 24—not much older than the young woman who served us at the party—it was the love language of Romans that pulled

me in, St. Paul's declaration that "...nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love."

To counter messages of hatred and division, we draw near to Divine expressions of hope, of God's love incarnate: Jesus our Savior, healer of the demon-possessed, feeder of the multitudes, gatherer of little children, deliverer of forgiveness, blessed prince of peace.

So, what are we to do we do with angry Jesus?

To answer this, it's helpful to consider the context of John's Gospel. All the Gospels record this incident, and we can take clues from these accounts about what incites Jesus's anger.

First, we have the misuse of the temple. The religious authorities have turned a sacred house of worship into a place of business, aligned with King Herod, the collecting of taxes, and the buying and selling of access to God. Ordinary people coming to the temple must offer sacrifices to be right with the priesthood. Merchants charge vulnerable travelers high prices for sacrificial animals, and the authorities take a portion of the profits to "maintain the temple." Jesus knows his religion is essentially robbing the poor, taking what little they have to make them feel worthy of coming before God. And this angers him.

Notice that on the rare occasions we see Jesus angry, it's never about him: his entitlement, what's fair to him, what he deserves. Through all his sufferings, from his arrest to the beatings to his unjust conviction, on the long march to the cross at

Golgotha, not once do we see Jesus angry. Even in his last anguished moments, he asks the Father to forgive those who have wronged him.

Jesus's anger is always about injustice, particularly the mistreatment of others, people on the margins, those without the means to advocate for themselves, people whose voices are silenced by corrupt powers and principalities.

And yet, anger often makes us afraid—uncomfortable.

We used to have a ministry here that explored issues of systemic racism in our society. It was called the Racially Aware Group of Episcopalians—shortened to the acronym RAGE. When I first came to Christ Church, the group was small but passionate, ignited by grief over the long line of Black men and women unjustly killed by law enforcement.

The RAGE group spent some time in discussion and discernment and brought in speakers to educate the congregation on various topics. But for some reason, month after month, we had the same few people show up at meetings. When I asked how we might get more energy around the ministry, several people commented that perhaps the name of the group—RAGE—might make people feel uncomfortable.

Friends, let me say clearly: There are things in this world that should anger us, enrage us, move us to zealously overturn the harm done to others. There are things that absolutely deserve our righteous indignation.

People murdered because of the color of their skin. Fences and walls erected to keep out people we deem unworthy. Children gunned down in their classrooms.

Laws created to rob others of their personal identity and freedoms. God's Creation desecrated for money.

Interfaith minister and ecological teacher Sara Jolena Wolcott speaks of anger as being like fire and of the power of anger joined with love. She says:

Fire is necessary for life [and] anger is a part of the larger fire in our lives...part of the flight-or-fight response that is core to how humans respond to danger...it has a valuable role to play...The trick with anger is to let it inform us, maybe even to let it warm us if we have become too cold with indifference or apathy, but not to let the fire control or consume us.

Ultimately, we want our lives to be guided: illuminated, warmed, comforted, provoked by our deep love affair with the Divine...Love is bigger than anger. Love still overtakes the divisions and fractions...there is room for anger in love. It is in God's holy fires that these emotions can be used well.¹

My takeaway from Wolcott's insights is that we need not fear an angry God, or the anger ignited in us by the oppression, exploitation, and persecution of vulnerable people by greed-driven, power-hungry authorities and systems. Yes, the world is filled with hateful people acting out in dangerous ways. But I believe that anger directed well, for righteous purposes, can be a transformative thing. I'll take that kind of anger over apathy any day.

This season of reflection and repentance offers an opportunity to consider where God is calling us to righteous anger. Where have we perhaps suppressed the flames of anger we're meant to direct in Christ-centered ways to right the wrongs

¹ Shirin McArthur, "Learning of Fire: An Interview with Sara Jolena Wolcott," [Oneing](#) 6, no. 1, [Anger](#) (Spring 2018): 39–41.

of a sinful humanity? Where should we, like Jesus, display a zeal for God's house that consumes?

As we continue along our Lenten journey, let us pray for discerning hearts and the wisdom to see how anger might connect us to the Divine love that empowers us to spread the Good News, to serve our neighbors, to help reconcile a broken world.