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 "The Journey of Transformation: Zeal"  
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 West Side Christian Church

John 2:13-22

What makes you angry? I don't get mad very often. But there is one thing that consistently gets my blood boiling. I will be driving down the highway in the midst of a steady flow of traffic when, out of nowhere, a car will drive right up on my bumper at an unsafe distance. Because of the traffic, he or she will not be able to pass, so they maintain their speed, not more than four or five feet directly behind me.

Finally, after a few miles, they will have a brief opening in the left or right lane to pass. They will speed up and fly by me, only to immediately move back into my lane, this time, right in front of me. Obviously, this forces me to unsafely begin pumping my brakes. The car then remains in front of me for a few miles until they can do the same thing all over again. By the time we have been approximately thirty miles, this individual will have gained all of thirty seconds on their trip.

I remember a car doing this as I was crossing over the Monitor Merrimac, heading back to Newport News. This particular time, the car cut me off so closely that I could not help but read this person's bumper sticker. It read, "If you are not appalled, you have not been paying attention." Well, I remember being particularly appalled at that moment. But sometimes I wonder if I have been paying attention.....

What about you? What makes you angry? Is it road rage? Is it the individual who cuts in front of you in line at the grocery store? Is it the newspaper delivery person throwing your newspaper in the bushes? Is it the person washing your car and missing a spot? Is it a colleague at work always complaining about something? Is it hearing someone chew with their mouth open?

It is okay to get angry. Jesus gets angry in our gospel reading this morning. In fact, Jesus gets so angry, he starts cracking a whip and driving people out of the Temple. He kicks over their tables and pours out the cash drawers. He destroys the birdcages and stampedes the cattle. Jesus isn't just angry, he is outraged. In fact, his outrage borders on self-righteous, indignation.

As Christians, I think sometimes we believe that anger is a sin. We walk around suppressing our anger and frustration because we believe that God does not want us to be angry. The truth is, though, that God gets angry.

Over and over again, God gets angry with the Israelites in the Old Testament. Of course, this isn't the only time Jesus gets angry. He gets angry at the Pharisees, pronouncing "Woe upon them!" for their corruption of the faith. He gets angry at the disciples for not getting it, time and again.

Anger is a healthy human emotion. It is inevitable that each of us will experience anger multiple times throughout our lives. Therefore, it is important that we develop helpful ways to manage and deal with our anger, so that it does not consume us and become a destructive force in our lives.

On the other hand, I am not so sure that our anger is *always* justified. In other words, I look at what Jesus is angry about in our passage this morning, I reflect on the things we tend to get angry about and I am not sure that our anger is always aligned with God's anger.

This morning's Old Testament Reading is the Ten Commandments, as they are written in Exodus. You probably remember, about a year ago, the media giving quite a bit of attention to a story about whether or not the Ten Commandments could be posted in public places.

In 2005, the Supreme Court made a ruling over two public displays of the Ten Commandments. One display was in Kentucky, the other was in Texas. It was a narrow vote, 5 to 4, but the decision was to make Kentucky remove the two large framed copies of the Ten Commandments from the court house while the public monuments in Texas, massive in size, were able to remain.

Last year, the issue was resurrected in Utah over the Ten Commandments being displayed in a public yard. Christians everywhere were outraged that the Ten Commandments were being removed from public places, specifically places where they had been posted for years.

Ironically, a recent survey, cited by Bill McKibben, reveals that less than 40 percent of church goers can name more than four of the Ten Commandments that we have just read. Most also don't know that the Ten Commandments actually appear three different places in the Old Testament and that in two of those places, twelve commandments are listed.<sup>1</sup>

The point is, not only is our anger sometimes silly, in the way that we fume about someone chewing with their mouth open or someone cutting us off as we drive down the highway, but often times our anger is also hypocritical. We get all worked up about things that obviously don't mean that much to us or, in the whole scheme of things, are relatively unimportant.

In the church, this manifests as being more angry about where the Ten Commandments can be posted, then knowing all of the Ten commandments, or for that matter living by them. In the church, this manifests as getting angry about what color of carpet we are going to put in the foyer rather than the injustices taking place in our neighborhood and community. In the church, this manifests as being angry about a

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<sup>1</sup> Willimon, William. "March 15, 2009-Foolish Wisdom." *Pulpit Resource*. Inver Grove Heights: Logos Productions, 2009.

change in the way we do ministry, instead of focusing on how that change might serve others rather than ourselves.

That bumper sticker is right, “If we are not appalled, we are not paying attention....” We are not paying attention to the same things to which God pays attention. Is your anger aligned with God’s anger?

If you recall, after Jesus cleanses the Temple, the text reads that the disciples remember that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” Both the words zeal and consumed tend to have negative connotations today. Zeal is often associated with fanatics and extremists. We might attribute the word “zealous” to terrorists or other militants.

Similarly, the word consumed is a potent verb. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tuberculosis was called consumption, and the image is now often applied to the working of cancer in human flesh. Being consumed, in almost every way, is considered unhealthy practice. Anger, perhaps, can be the most consuming of all human emotions. It can take over our mind, bodies, and spirits.

However, it is not Jesus’ anger that consumes him. Instead, our text tells us that it is his zeal—a zeal for God’s justice, a passion for God’s will to be done, a fire that is determined to change the status quo and transform people’s lives. Ultimately, the kind of anger that Jesus expresses does not come from petty inconveniences or trivial conflicts. Instead, it comes from a zeal for God’s will to be done—a zeal for God’s Kingdom here on earth.

This kind of zeal causes anger about the fact that, as recently as 2004, we ranked second to last, after Italy, among developed countries in government foreign aid. Per capita we each provide only 15 cents a day in development assistance to poor countries. Our charitable giving increases our average daily donation by just six pennies, to 21 cents.

This kind of zeal causes anger about the fact that nearly 18 percent of American children live in poverty. By any measure of caring for the least among us - childhood nutrition, infant mortality, and access to preschool - we come in nearly last among the rich nations.

This kind of zeal causes anger about the fact that the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that the number of households that were “food insecure with hunger” had climbed more than 26 percent between 1999 and 2003.

This kind of zeal causes anger about the fact that despite the sixth commandment that you just heard read, we are, of course, the most violent rich nation on earth, with a murder rate four or five times that of our European peers.

This kind of zeal causes anger about the fact we have prison populations greater by a factor of six or seven than other rich nations (which at least should give us plenty of opportunity for visiting the prisoners). Having been commanded not to kill, foolishly told to turn the other cheek, we're the only Western democracy left that executes its citizens.

This kind of zeal causes anger about the fact that despite Jesus' condemnation of divorce, our marriages break up at a rate that's worse than any country in Europe. And Teenage pregnancy? We're at the top of the charts.<sup>2</sup>

This kind of zeal does cause anger....but is it your anger?

One interesting note to consider. In the other gospels, Jesus turning over the money changers tables in the Temple is the final thing, the precipitating event that leads to his crucifixion. However, in the gospel of John, it is almost the first thing that Jesus does after his baptism. This story in John is found in chapter two.

If our own Lenten journey is to mirror that of Christ's, both as individuals and as a congregation, then after we have been tempted and after we have made the decision to allow God to change us, its time that we start paying attention to what really needs transforming. Its time we stop worrying so much about ourselves, the small things, and start being zealous, start channeling our anger toward God's kingdom come, *God's* will be done.

That bumper sticker had some truth, but I would probably change it to read "If you are not appalled, you have not been paying attention to that which God pays attention....."

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Willimon.