

October 13, 2024

Mark 11:12-14; 20-25

“The Meaning of Anger”

Jennifer Riddle

Have you ever experienced a situation in which everything appeared fine from the outside, but something within you rebelled? You may or may not have acted on your discomforting emotion, but it left you feeling disconnected from your present circumstances.

Throughout most of my life I've had enough to live on. My parents were both public school teachers in New York, where the state did a good job ensuring appropriate compensation. As a young adult, there were some lean times, but my parents were able to help when things got really challenging. I always had a safety net, a solid education, and the resources to make things work. In that way, I had a tremendous amount of economic privilege.

Understanding that, I haven't spent much time around folks for whom money is no object and have no hesitations about ostentatious displays of wealth. On the rare occasion when I'm in those spaces, I often have a visceral reaction. It's as if the ever-widening gap between rich and poor in our country is on display in front of me and it becomes overwhelming. My empathic soul is reacting to a significant injustice in our society, but I feel torn since I'm in that moment a beneficiary of privilege. I haven't yet figured out how to manage those situations or use my voice in them, but I'm beginning to dive underneath the surface of the challenging, visceral reactions these scenarios create.

Today's scripture is an interesting text in the Women's Lectionary. Neither this passage nor its parallel in Matthew are read in the Revised Common Lectionary. It's a difficult text and one in which many preachers might gloss over the action of Jesus and jump to his teaching on faith and prayer. But I think if we did that today, we would miss something important for us especially in this divisive political climate.

When met Jesus today, he was on the road from Bethany to Jerusalem, heading back to the scene of the triumphal entry. He and the disciples stayed the night about 2 miles outside of Jerusalem and were returning to the Temple. The episode with the fig tree, in Mark's timeline, happens during Holy Week. Just the day before, Jesus was welcomed into Jerusalem with all the fanfare of a king or military dignitary.

He was riding high...or so we might imagine, as the Gospel doesn't record Jesus' emotion at the time. As we enter today's story, it appears Jesus missed breakfast that morning and was looking to a fig tree to feed his rumbling belly. As the passage highlights, figs were out of season and there was no fruit on the tree to eat. Despite seeming to ask for the impossible, Jesus is angry and curses the fig tree.

From here, Jesus and the disciples continue to Jerusalem, where his anger remains on display. In the next episode, Jesus is aggrieved by the actions of the money changers in the

Temple and drives them out of the space, overturning tables, and declaring that they've turned the Temple into a "den of robbers." Jesus was making enemies among the chief priests by his actions, though the people, as the text tells us, "[were] spellbound by his teaching."

I find it fascinating that Jesus went from experiencing being worshipped to two episodes of intense anger. We don't know what exactly sparked that anger since an out-of-season fig tree not bearing fruit is a weak enemy. I wonder if Jesus knew the crowds would turn on him quickly and their affections were fickle. I wonder if he understood that his time was short and action in the Temple needed to be swift and bold. I wonder if he was angry that his ministry was about to end.

I'm sure you have a lot of wondering questions yourself about this story. Though we can't know many of the answers to our questions, we can see that Jesus was clearly demonstrating his humanity here. His anger shows that he is a deeply feeling Savior, not a distant God.

Anger is a first-order emotion among humans, most often grouped with happy and sad as the most commonly felt. Researcher Brene Brown says in her book *Atlas of the Heart* that anger is "an emotion...we feel when something gets in the way of a desired outcome or when we believe there's a violation of the way things should be." Brown goes on to describe anger as an "indicator emotion that can mask or make us unaware of other feelings that are out of reach in terms of language, or that are much more difficult to talk about than anger."

On the front of your bulletin is a photograph of an iceberg. We know that only a small portion of the iceberg is visible above the water and the vast majority of it lies in the depths below. Anger functions like an iceberg: anger is what we can see, but other emotions may lie beneath the surface. The anger we see from Jesus with the fig tree and the money changers appears to be the tip of the emotional iceberg for him as well.

Because our vocabulary of emotion is often small, we miss the opportunity to understand fully what lies beneath our anger. Tools like this social-emotional chart used to coach people through understanding their anger. In this chart, we can see that anger may present first, but beneath the initial response lies fear, anxiety, shame, hurt, loneliness, and many more. The iceberg below is much bigger and more complicated than what we can see above.

When Jesus and the disciples readied to return to Jerusalem the next day, they noticed the withered fig tree. Peter, ever the one to point out the obvious, declares, "Look! The fig tree you have cursed has withered!" Peter's statement is full of wonder, considering that this is Jesus' first and only destructive miracle. But he's also looking for answers here. I can hear the "why?" behind the statement because that's my question as well. Jesus, what was the point of killing this tree?

Jesus' response leaves me less than satisfied. Rather than attempting to unpack the emotions he's feeling that led him to react in anger, Jesus begins a discourse on faith and prayer. In some ways this feels trite. Many of us have heard these verses over the years used to support praying hard enough and believing enough to make impossible things happen through prayer. What about all the people who pray in good faith and whose cancer is not healed? What about our prayers for the war in Gaza to end and yet many continue to die each day by bombing and starvation?

The way we often hear this text in our culture leads us to use prayer as a magical tool. This tool doesn't require any action on our part to help bring about whatever healing or rescue or peace we ask for. We just want a quick fix. I wonder if in this discourse Jesus is also looking for a magical way out of his predicament that is causing so much anger to arise for him. In just a few days on from this passage, we will hear him in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying with fervency that God might change the plan, and that Jesus might not have to go through the pain that was to come. Despite Jesus' prayer that night, he went on to suffer and die and to ultimately defeat death in the process. Jesus' own faith and prayers did not change that situation.

There is much anger surrounding us today. We see the Bible twisted to support gross injustice and Christians clambering to back candidates who harm and defame the immigrants and strangers our Scriptures call us to protect. The sheer amount of misinformation and disinformation occurring is dizzying. It is no wonder that anger is the primary emotion we exhibit. We can only manage base-level emotional awareness in times of tremendous stress and upheaval. I think we are all yearning for our prayers to operate as a quick solution to the pain of our present age.

Some things I learned this week at a seminary gathering and Jesus' final comment to the disciples in this passage resonated with me as a response to our anger in this challenging season. During our time together at Christian Theological Seminary, we discussed how to lead in a climate of misinformation. Through the speakers and panels who presented, I heard several things loud and clear:

Firstly, we need to pay attention to our bodies. They are trying to tell us something! We are often disconnected from listening to our bodies because we are constantly feeding ourselves with input. We would all benefit from more time processing, as the input makes it difficult for us to monitor ourselves. Our bodies contain deep knowing and when we listen to them, we are more able to discover the emotions and triggers that lie beneath the surface of our anger.

Secondly, when we encounter mis- and dis-information and the purveyor of it is someone we have a relationship with, approach them with curiosity rather than animosity. When we can step back, breathe, and ask good questions, we are able to listen for the emotions and reasons why the other person is susceptible to believing the disinformation. It provides us space to experience empathy rather than anger.

The final point was that we must be able to admit that we can also be wrong. This is intimately connected to Jesus' last statement in today's Scripture: "When you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses." Friends, you and I are not immune from having contributed to the culture of anger in our country. We have also rapidly posted memes and statements without fact checking. We haven't taken the time to truly listen to our neighbors with different political opinions. We have dismissed their concerns because of all the emotions that lie under the surface of our own unexamined anger.

May we all recognize the anger in our lives and take the time to dive under the surface to begin the work of discovery and resolution. May we all learn to forgive others who have not yet been able to do that exploration, recognizing that we all have more work to do. Amen.

Discussion questions:

1. Reflect on a time when your anger surprised you. What emotions or experiences lay underneath your anger?
2. Anger has been a significant part of the political rhetoric the last several years. What do you see is lying beneath that anger for different political interests?
3. Looking at how Jesus responds to Peter's question of his cursing the fig tree (Mark 11:22), how does Jesus' response strike you? How might you have felt if you were a disciple listening to Jesus' response?

