

Facebook LIVE Sermon

Mark 11:12-19

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

¹² On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. ¹³ Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

¹⁵ Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; ¹⁶ and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?

But you have made it a den of robbers."

¹⁸ And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. ¹⁹ And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

I would like to talk especially to the children for a moment. Let's play a game! I will say a word and you make a face that goes with that word. Let's start with an easy one: HAPPY. I am feeling happy as I imagine your happy faces. Here's another word: SAD. What about SURPRISED? SCARED? Last one...MAD. That's what I want to talk to you about today: being mad. I wonder what Jesus' face looked like when he was at the temple that day. He seemed really mad, didn't he? First, he seemed mad when he saw that the fig tree didn't have any figs on it. And then when he arrived at the temple, he seemed mad when he turned over the tables. Have you ever gotten so mad that you wanted to throw something or break something? I have. Have you ever been so mad that you yelled at your mom or dad or a friend? Everyone gets mad. Everyone.

Being mad is not a bad thing. It's okay to be mad. But when we are, it's important to tell other people how we are feeling, rather than breaking things or yelling words that are hurtful. Try starting by saying, "I am mad." And then tell the person why you are mad like, "I am mad because I wanted to play with that ball

and my brother kicked it over the fence.” Try to use your words to express your anger. If you find that you are so mad you can’t find the words, ask for a few minutes alone to think about what you would like to say. Feeling mad sometimes is part of being a person and you are some of my favorites. When you are mad, use your words to talk about how you feel. The people you love and who love you will be so glad you did.

While I share my sermon, will you remember a time when you were really mad? Draw a picture of what that felt like. After worship, share your picture with your family or with us by posting it on Facebook. You can share a mad face of yourself too! I would love to see your face however you are feeling!

This story is one of my favorite Jesus stories. I know I’ve shared with you before that when I was a child, the image I had of Jesus was of him sitting in some picturesque place, surrounded by children and looking kind and gentle. And in the shadow of Good Friday, I can tell you, Jesus was not crucified because he was kind and gentle. He was crucified because his message was a threat to Rome. This kind and gentle Jesus makes for a great painting, but as I got older, that Jesus did nothing to inspire me to seek a relationship with God. In fact, it did the exact opposite. You see, if Jesus was supposed to be my role model, and he was always kind and gentle, then his ways were definitely not for me.

I was most certainly not always kind and gentle and, even as a child, I knew there were things in the world that deserved my anger. As a young adult, I learned about the real Jesus, who told stories and said things that made people uncomfortable, who was funny, sarcastic, and, yes, angry, who cared more about people who were suffering and left out than he did about his reputation or even his safety. That was a Jesus I could get behind. That was a Jesus whose ways I was willing to try to follow. That was the Jesus I was introduced to in this story.

The story takes place the day after Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. He rode into town in what can best be described as a planned political protest. Upon arrival, he went right to the temple, took a look around, and left. The next day, on his way back to the temple, the author of Mark tells us he was hangry. He saw a fig tree and when he realized it had no figs, he cursed it and moved on. What we need to know in order to “get” this part of the story is that if Jesus was in Jerusalem for Passover, figs were not in season. There was no reason for Jesus to expect figs on the tree.

It would be like going to an apple orchard in Oklahoma right now and getting mad because there were no apples ready to be picked and eaten. The story of the fig tree serves as a literary clue that what Jesus was about to do in the temple should be understood symbolically, not literally.

Jesus' actions, turning over the money changers' tables and the seats of the people who sold animals for sacrifice, was a planned demonstration, much like the planned demonstration of the day before. Jesus was not "cleansing the temple," he was symbolically destroying it for the same reason he cursed the fig tree: lack of fruit.

But the money changers were not the problem, they were, to use a phrase we are too familiar with these days, "essential workers." The same is true for the ones selling animals. The problem was the ways in which the religious leaders of the temple were beholden to the political leaders of Rome. In fact, the line was so blurred that it was hard to know the difference between the two groups, they were working in tandem. In a nutshell, Judaism's high priests were Rome's primary local collaborators and this was true all over, including in Jerusalem at the temple. Rome used the religious leaders to keep the people "peacefully" in line.

Jesus had nothing against Jewish priests, nothing against the temple's role in Judaism, or even animal sacrifices. The problem was with temple leadership. The work of the priests was to mediate between the people and God. The priests were to represent God to the people and the people to God. There was no way for the priests to be on the side of the people or on the side of God while collaborating with Rome. The priests were acting as if they could have it all...fulfill their role as priest and be in cahoots with Rome. But their collaboration with Rome perpetuated injustice on the very people they were supposed to care for. Jesus was at the temple that day to remind the temple leaders that God cares about justice...a lot. Repeatedly in scripture God says, "I reject your worship because of your lack of justice."

Amos 5: "I hate, I despise your festivals and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...I will not accept them...But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Micah 6: "With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Isaiah 1: “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices...I have had enough of your burnt offerings...seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan plead for the widow.”

The Church, like the temple, is supposed to be about making justice happen. I admit, every time I read or hear about a church that is insisting on continuing to meet face to face during this pandemic, I get a vision of Jesus busting into the place, unplugging microphones, tearing down screens, and ripping up some minister’s carefully crafted sermon. We are supposed to be on the side of the people. We are supposed to protect them. Encouraging people to gather together for worship, making people who are feeling especially vulnerable feel like they are less than faithful if they don’t go to a church building to worship, is exactly the kind of thing that Jesus would have railed against.

This story is a stern warning to the Church and to all people of faith. Our worship means nothing without justice. God cares way more about the way we treat people than about our perfectly executed worship services. And sitting where I’m sitting today, I am super thankful for that. One of our core values at Disciples is justice through service. What that means is that we intend to be a community of people who are constantly working for justice. As important as worship is, it is not why DCC exists and we can never forget that. We exist to bring wholeness to a fragmented world. We exist to represent God and God’s interests in the world. And friends, I am so glad we are doing that work together. Amen.