Jesus’s Anger at Injustices: Rev. Emily Swan, Feb. 5, 2017

Introduction
I don’t know about you-all, but I’ve been feeling a little bombarded by the news lately.

I find myself having all kinds of emotions (and maybe you do, too). A mixture of anxiety (you can ask my wife … I seriously bought a month’s worth of emergency meals last week … prepper style … to Rachel’s amusement). A bit of sadness, denial, glimpses of hope (the judicial systems seems to be working), as well as moments of anger.

I’m not too keen to dwell on the stress this morning, but I thought it would be helpful to do two things. First I think it might be helpful to validate some of our feelings about the injustices around us and how they’re affecting us. We talk a lot about Jesus at Blue Ocean, and what it means to follow him, so we’ll look at a particular story that I think reveals God’s heart regarding injustice.

And second, I think it might be helpful for some of us to talk about how to find rest in the midst of everything. I like what my friend, Pastor Mihee Kim-Kort, said. She said: “This is a marathon, not a sprint.” So we need to think about self-care and finding rest in God as we move forward in speaking out against unjust actions and policies.

Jesus in the Temple
There’s a story about Jesus that pops up in all four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), which tells us it was an important story for the early Jesus movement and how they understood their Rabbi. Most stories don’t appear in all four gospels. I particularly like the account in John because it contains a couple of extra details that Matthew, Mark, and Luke leave out.

It’s the story about Jesus overturning the moneychangers’ tables in the Temple. And it goes like this:

It was about 30 CE. And when it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, a feast celebrated every year in the Jewish tradition, Jesus went up to Jerusalem with some of his friends to observe the holiday. And while he was there he, like most Jews, went to the temple to worship. Some scholars think that as many as 300,000-400,000 pilgrims went to Jerusalem each year for the feast when Jesus lived.

Now the temple in Jerusalem was enormous; the temple grounds covered 30 acres. And it was divided into four courts. When you first walked in you would find yourself in a huge, long court called the Court of the Gentiles. This is where people who were not Jewish, and people who were foreigners, could go to worship. On the right side of the Court of the Gentiles you could go into a space called Solomon’s Porch (where Jesus would sometimes teach), and from there on into the Women’s Court (for Jewish women), the Men’s Court (sometimes called the Court of Israel, for Jewish men), and then the Priest’s court was beyond that with the alter and the porch into the Holy of Holies, where the high priest could enter once a year. The Holy of Holies was surrounded by a giant curtain.
So the temple gets increasingly exclusive as you move inward. When Jesus died, we’re told the giant curtain blocking the inmost part, the Holy of Holies, where God’s presence was thought to reside … that curtain ripped down the middle. Effectively dismantling the exclusive nature of the temple as God’s presence was unleashed into the world for all to access.

But when Jesus comes to the temple on this day for the Passover, that hadn’t yet happened. So he walked into the first courtyard where everyone is allowed to enter, the Court of the Gentiles. And in this court he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money.

John 2:15-16 - So he made a whip out of cords, and drove them all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!”

Now, there are a couple of layers to the story we should pay attention to. The first layer gives us an obvious interpretation of what’s happening: that Jesus was angry because the merchants were selling things in a place of worship; they were profiting excessively off of something that should be sacred.

When you came to the Temple to make sacrifices, you might be coming from quite a distance, and you might only have Roman or other foreign currency on you. But in the temple, you were only allowed to use the Hebrew money, shekels. So you had to exchange your Roman or other foreign currency when you arrived, and then use the shekels to purchase a lamb or a goat for sacrifice. Or, if you were too poor for a lamb or a goat, you’d buy two doves or two pigeons.

So these merchants had set up shops to accommodate these sacrificial needs so people didn’t have to bring animals with them from days away. That makes sense in many ways to me—they were filling a need. But the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke have Jesus saying to the merchants, “My house is a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers!” Which tells us the merchants were likely profiting unjustly from this system of convenience. They were taking advantage of people.

Another layer to pay attention to is that the merchants were setting up shop within the Court of the Gentiles. Not outside of the temple, but inside the temple. Two of the early church theologians from the 2nd and 3rd centuries, Heracleon and Origen, brought something to light for me.

Origen quotes Heracleon saying that “those found in the temple selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money-changers sitting, represent those who give nothing away free but suppose the entrance of foreigners into the temple to be a matter of merchandise and profit.”
They’re saying that what Jesus was really mad at was that people were deliberately keeping the foreigners from having a space of worship. In addition to trying to profit off of them as they came into the holy place. When they see foreigners they think, “Oh good, money!”, instead of “Please come worship with us. You’re welcome here.” So it was doubly-offensive.

I think this is worth paying attention to, this idea that Jesus was furious because the people were preventing outsiders from experiencing worship. “My house is a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers!” makes a lot of sense when you realize the merchants were quite literally keeping people from being part of the worship community in the Temple. This was a big deal to Jesus. I mean, if you want to see what makes God really mad in Scripture, taking advantage of the poor and mistreating the foreigners in the land are the themes that run throughout Scripture. I can’t emphasize them enough. Beginning in the Law of Moses:

**Deut. 10:17-19** - For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt. [YOU know what it’s like to be an outsider. YOU know what it’s like to be treated as second-class citizens. YOU know what it’s like to be slaves. YOU know what it’s like to be oppressed. When you set up your own society, don’t turn around and do this to others. You know better.]

**Proverbs 29:7** - The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.

Neglecting the oppressed, the poor, and the foreigner are the very things the prophet Jeremiah and others said caused the Israelites to be exiled in the land of Babylon for 70 years. Jeremiah warns the Israelites:

**Jeremiah 22:3, 5** - This is what the Lord says: “Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place ... But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin.”

This could also be a timely word for America today. Let’s read it again with that in mind:

**Jeremiah 22:3, 5** - This is what the Lord says: “Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place [as yet another unarmed black man was killed by
Jesus’s Anger at Injustices: Rev. Emily Swan, Feb. 5, 2017

police this week] ... But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin.”

I don’t think Jeremiah meant God was going to send a lightning bolt down and destroy the palace, just as I don’t think God will send a lightning bold down to destroy America. I think Jeremiah meant that the palace would become a ruinous wasteland by its own doing, as a natural consequence of neglecting the poor, the oppressed, and the foreigners. And that we should pay attention to what it does to us when we do the same.

In the words of the book of Ecclesiastics: “There is nothing new under the sun.” What has happened before is happening now and will happen again.

So the Gospel of John invites us to imagine Jesus deliberately making a whip. Like, he walked into that large, bustling courtyard, saw what was happening—the poor and the foreigners being exploited—and he felt a seething anger in his heart. So he set out with purpose, to find some leather cords, looking around near all the booths. And when he found some he sat down and he took the cords and he braided them. With each braid he’s feeling himself fill with a righteous anger.

And then he took that whip he made:

And [he] drove them all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

The grammar of the Greek (which is the original language of the text) makes it clear Jesus drove the sheep and the cattle out of temple. He used the whip to move the animals along, not the people. A few interpreters have tried to use the passage to justify using violence against others, and it’s just not an accurate interpretation. Please don’t go out and get all Indiana Jones on people. Walking into your senator’s offices all [sing Indiana Jones theme song].

In the Gospels of Mark and John, the word “drove” (as in, Jesus drove them out of the temple) is the same word used for the Spirit “driving” Jesus into the desert in Mark 1:12 and Jesus “driving” demons out of people throughout the Gospel. It’s a forceful word implying Jesus was moved by the Spirit of God, rather than by any kind of physical strength. The Spirit was leading him. The Spirit can use anger to enact change.

**Anger is the correct response to injustice.** Some of us have been taught that anger is bad and something we need to tamp down, which is not often the best way to deal with anger. Becoming angry, in some cases, is the right course of action. We call this righteous anger in our tradition.

This righteous anger isn’t the kind of uncontrolled anger that hurts our relationships with our partners and our kids and our colleagues. It’s a constructive anger that we see
Jesus’s Anger at Injustices: Rev. Emily Swan, Feb. 5, 2017

Jesus turn into a deliberate prophetic act to point out the injustice in his community. I think we, also, are invited to create acts or works of art that point out injustices in our communities.

My personal challenge has been, and still is, how to let anger drive me to help change injustices happening around me, but not let the anger rule me. How can anger drive me, but not rule me?

Mad With Me
I know I’ve told this story a few times over the years, so I apologize if it’s a repeat, but it’s been an important one for me and I think could be helpful so I’ll offer it again.

Almost 10 years ago now I spent some time in one of the poorest parts of the world. I saw some difficult things—a picture that’s stuck with me is of a small child covered in flies and dying outside a hut b/c he didn’t have money for adequate medical care. The bus I’d been on got a flat tire in the middle of a fairly desert-y area, and while we waited for the driver to change the tire, my friends and I wandered over to some grass huts where we encountered this dying child. My friend who is a nurse tended to him, but as we walked away she shook her head and said he wasn’t going to make it.

My friends and I were robbed and threatened, the police who responded were thoroughly corrupt, asking us for large bribes. The poverty and the suffering of the people around us was as intense as I’ve seen in the world, and I’ve been around. I thought, “I only spent a few months here, but the people who live here live with the crippling poverty and corruption and suffering day in and day out.”

When I came back to the U.S. for a time, I was mad at God. I wondered if God could possibly be good if some humans on this planet suffer so much. What is the point of the suffering? There’s no point to it. Where was God? If he or she exists, and if he or she is powerful, why do people hurt? Why can’t God help? Or does God just not want to help?

I still don’t have answers to those questions, and probably never will, though I think I have a different way of seeing it now. I remember being angry with God for quite awhile, and not praying or talking with God for months. And then one day, as I was in the kitchen leaning down to get a cookie sheet from under the oven, I heard a voice say, “Instead of being angry at me, why don’t you try being angry with me?”. It was out of the blue—I wasn’t praying or anything.

And that flipped the script for me. It’s what Cassie described as happening with her Immanuel Prayer times when she preached a couple of weeks ago. The voice of God seems to be able to help reframe our situation. That voice I heard invited me to imagine God as angry and upset at the injustices instead of as the source of them, and invited me to harness that same anger to drive change, imagining him running beside me with the same anger and compassion. What I’ve learned is that we’re actually tapping into
the very heart of God for the oppressed when we feel these things WITH Him. This is a key aspect of God’s character. It’s who he is. He hates injustice and suffering.

So, if you’re one who is inclined to feel like you shouldn’t let anger drive you to make change, I’d offer to you that your anger may, in fact, be God-given. We’re responsible for what we do with that anger, and not everything we might want to do would be productive or helpful, but the anger itself is okay.

**A Church Heart-to-Heart**
Ken and I have been talking with each other about the church and its role in fighting injustices. And we’re both on the same page in this.

At the National Prayer Gathering at the White House this past Thursday, our president said he was going to “get rid of” and “totally destroy” the Johnson Act. As you may or may not know, churches and other faith communities don’t pay property taxes. It’s part of the separation of church and state. What the Johnson Act said was that, since places of worship don’t pay property taxes, they shouldn’t be allowed to endorse political candidates. It’s not fair to the American taxpayer to have them effectively subsidize campaigning inside churches. I think it’s a good and fair law.

Let me just say that: if the Johnson Act goes away, Ken and I will still never endorse a political candidate from the pulpit. Our church will not endorse political candidates. Church money will never be given to a political campaign. I have theological reasons for keeping those things separate, as well as significant pastoral reasons, as well as reasons of concern as a private citizen.

That said, I will speak out against injustices. As will Ken. And we’ll speak out against authoritarianism, even from the pulpit when necessary. We won’t be talking politics all the time, but when we feel we need to, we will. I will protest with my clergy collar on (one of the few times I wear one!), and we will train people in the Christian tradition of nonviolent resistance. Both Ken and I are of that tradition in our own ways, and it is a long and deep and rich tradition.

**Social Gospel**
I also thought it might be helpful to offer a little perspective on churches and social justice in the U.S. What you sometimes hear called “the Social Gospel” got a bad rap in some circles. (Have any of you ever heard of the Social Gospel?) What I mean by the Social Gospel is a reading of Scripture that embraces and emphasizes the importance of social justice on the Jesus path. That says if we aren’t seeking to help liberate the oppressed, then the gospel has lost its power and we’ve missed a significant point of the Bible.

Christianity at its worst bolsters oppression; Christianity at its best drives social change. Christianity, as we well know, has been used to justify terrible things throughout history and we don’t have to as far back as the Crusades to see it. We see it in more recent things like upholding the system of Apartheid in South Africa,
Jesus’s Anger at Injustices: Rev. Emily Swan, Feb. 5, 2017

justifying oppressing Palestinians in Israel, justifying slavery and Jim Crow laws and white supremacy in our country, justifying the oppression of women everywhere, and bolstering many other unjust systems. But Christianity has also been used, or is being used, to dismantle these unjust systems. Every one of them.

Many black churches in the 20th century embraced the Social Gospel, and did so effectively and filled with the Spirit of God. I am still learning from that tradition. Some white Protestants also embraced the Social Gospel, but in the evangelical circles in which I grew up, the Social Gospel was derided as being “not very Christian” or “liberal and devoid of the presence of God.” Seriously. (To be fair, some evangelicals are starting to clue in to the importance of justice again.)

Our hope for Blue Ocean Faith is that we can embrace the best of the Social Gospel while remaining centered on Jesus and infused with his Spirit. That we can learn from our brothers and sisters who have done that and continue to do that: in the African American church, in the Native American church, in the Latin American church, and in many other places and spaces where people who are oppressed have grappled with the gospel and what it means. And that we can find our source of strength and peace and re-filling in the resurrected and living Jesus who through his Spirit breaths comfort and refreshment into our souls.

Some Peace, Please
Because it’s exhausting to do the work of justice and to have all these feelings when the news is popping at us. And we’re all busy people, and now many of us are adding even more to our lives—meeting with community action groups and calling politicians and writing letters and protesting. How do we take care of ourselves?

Again, as my friend Mi-hee said, “This is a marathon, not a sprint.” We can’t do everything. Like running, we have to pace ourselves or we’ll want to walk off the track a few miles in.

First, do what you can, not what you can’t. Don’t try to do everything. We like to say here that “it’s all about connection,” and I believe that’s true. We talk about connecting to ourselves, to each other, to God, and to the world around us. One way you can connect to yourself is to know and understand your limits.

You could do something like what Ken does—build a 5 minute habit into your life of calling representatives. That’s do-able and sustainable. I’m trying to take one action a day, whether it’s donating money to the ACLU or calling people or whatnot.

Second, nurture friendships that are mutual in nature (meaning one isn’t giving more than the other all the time), because those kinds of relationships will help you renew and stay true to your particular call. Connect to each other. Join grassroots groups working for justice. Ken’s starting one called Faith In Action on Tuesday nights.
Third, pick an issue or two to focus on if that helps you. It can be overwhelming to think of all the issues that cause concern right now. Between mental health funding and health care and education and LGBTQ rights and on and on. Focus on what ignites your passion. Because that will keep you running over the long haul.

Fourth, make time to relax and exercise.

Fifth, listen and learn. To that end, Ken and I decided to use Howard Thurman’s classic book “Jesus and the Disinherited” as inspiration for our Lenten sermon series. We’ll delve in and learn together. As I said before, there’s a rich tradition of social justice theology we can learn from, and what better time to delve in than now?

Last, but certainly not least, pray. I know I’m a pastor and I’m supposed to say that, but there’s a reason we’ve been preaching on Immanuel prayer and practicing meditation and silence as a congregation. And there’s a reason we focus on prayer every Lenten season, which is coming up soon. Prayer is the real life-source. Because if you’re connected to Jesus, or to God-however-you-imagine-this-God-Who-Is-Love, you will be guided and comforted. Jesus can help us know where to focus, when to rest, and when to run. And Jesus can fill us up as the source of our strength and endurance.

So we’re going to spend some extra time this week doing our guided meditation and invite the Spirit to renew us.

Guided Meditation

Take some slow breaths. You can close your eyes if you want, but you don’t have to.

Pay attention to your body. Feel the chair under you, and if you’re tall enough, feel the floor beneath your feet. Notice any tension in your muscles. Just note it.
1. comfortable, breath
2. imagine the court of the gentiles in the story, only it’s been cleared out of any money changers and animals, it’s empty
3. what’s the weather like? what do you see? feel? smell? are you standing, walking, sitting?
4. imagine people there with you who you feel anxious for - Muslims, queers, POC … and/or people from your family or work
5. look on them and ask the Spirit of Love to fill you with love and compassion for them
6. breath in love, breath out anxiety
7. Spirit, give us a heart to care for people … to love our neighbors as we love ourselves
8. where is jesus?
9. is he saying anything? doing anything?