

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Everyday Wisdom: The Problem of Heat”

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Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly. A tranquil mind gives life to the flesh, but passion makes the bones rot.

Proverbs 14:29-30

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.”

The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became angry and said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?’”

Matthew 21:12-16

Our sermon series of wisdom literature focuses on the Old Testament book of Proverbs for another few Sundays. Last week, we lifted up the significance of Proverbs 3 trusting the Lord, leaning not on our own understanding, but in all our ways acknowledging God who makes straight our paths.

We also noted how God’s sages of ancient Israel believed that God created an orderly universe. Wisdom consists of learning to live in harmony with God’s order. As God-followers, we are to align, or realign, ourselves with that orderly living- both individually and corporately.

Today, we explore wisdom in Proverbs 14 dealing with anger. Proverbs 14:29 declares, “*Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly.*”

This is the word of the Lord... thanks be to God.

“Slow to anger” or “having a long fuse” is certainly what the world needs! It’s very common to struggle with a quick fuse or quick temper when we don’t get our way. We’re not just impatient with earthly things; we lose patience with spiritual things, too. We can readily give up praying, if something is not answered right away. This adds to the foolishness out there.

Theologian Louis Berkhof once said, "God does not want us as objects but as covenant partners, partners who can converse. God desires our patient or impatient prayers and questions rather than our silent, unconvinced acquiescence."

Do you think God gets impatient? There is a good amount of misinterpretation of the Old Testament Yahweh often coming across as losing his cool too soon. If you proof text, i.e., just read one isolated passage, without its greater context, God *can* seem harsh.

These people point to Genesis in the time of Abraham with Sodom and Gomorrah inhabitants and land being destroyed by fire from heaven (Genesis 19:24). They may even use this story in Matthew of Jesus turning over the tables in the Jerusalem temple. Look a little more deliberately at the greater context and we see God actually, in these cases and more, being very patient and gracious with them then and us now.

That said, when we read about the Son of God in the Gospels, I'm curious did Jesus ever max out with his patience? Was he slow to anger, or did he have a hasty temper?

The story of Jesus turning over the furniture must have only been part of the story. I suspect on other visits to the temple, he endured, bit his tongue, and showed restraint. Clearly, this temple problem was his "trigger issue", to use an anger management term. He got really heated. Yet, His judgement of exiling people was tempered with grace. One could say with merciful self-limitations, but he wanted to make a point. He used his emotion for something positive instead of negative.

What culminated to specifically make Jesus hot-headed that day? Many Bible study curriculums and commentaries mistakenly think that Jesus had a problem with the temple secularizing or commercializing. Have you thought that? I have.

With further study, I've come to a new opinion. That Jesus was not attempting to *restore* the temple. His anger was not about inappropriate sacrifices of temple offerings. Sacrifices were expected for faithful Jewish worship. After all, Mary and Joseph offered a pair of doves and two young pigeons when Jesus was presented at the temple after his birth. So, selling animals and exchanging money in the temple was no more impure than using offering envelopes or pledge cards in churches today.

Jesus is doing more than **restoring**; he is radically **changing**. Changing the religious thinking of his time. Professor of Preaching, Tom Long, says, "Jesus yearns for a deeper sense of God's will, to allow God's true intent for the world to emerge. He's overturning the old and erecting the new. He's building a new temple out of his words and deeds. He's vacating the old, in order to clear out space where the Messiah reigns and where the kingdom of God holds sway."ⁱ

Jesus, among a growing number of opponents, knew something had to be changed. He seized the chance here to make a difference. Keeping that level head with his anger to calculate the greater good, Jesus stretches the understanding of what was to what it could be.

He was rightfully impatient. He became angry that the people in charge of the temple were focusing on what's seen which is temporary, rather than what's unseen which is eternal. The temple had lost its original purpose of communion with God. It used to be the place that symbolized the special relationship between God and Israel, but it had forgotten the sense of being a house of prayer.

Our Lord was fired up about what was wrong with the place that was made for good. He was the new temple, a place to put trust, in connection with the Father. He would become the cornerstone for a new different kind of building, where everything is built around the relationship and the person, not earthly things. One where he would ultimately be known as the head of the body.

The old temple was a place of privilege, where only those deemed righteous, by the purity codes, could be considered worthy. As Jesus became the new temple, he was showing that the Church would be building something fresh, increasing its love. It would be welcoming the blind, and lame, the children and those who had been excluded previously.

He was tired that some seeking to find God were being restricted. Temples and sanctuaries are places to free them from bondage.

The *new* mission of the church was where people found mercy and peace, forgiveness and transformation. It allows for the world to see the surprising, gracious ways of God and to draw near. In this, people don't have to portray to be more religious than they really are.

Instead, they come with their pain; they come when they are unable to see a future with hope; they come with a metaphorical limp and are made well; they come not knowing all the answers, yet welcomed in questioning; they come even angry as the dickens but are welcomed to lay down their frustrating burden.

We don't qualify to come to church for fellowship with God. We are accepted as we are, so God can do a quality thing in us! Our character doesn't have to be perfect, but be wise enough to trust the Perfector of Faith, our Lord, who makes our rough places plain.

How, then, do we prevent our heart from getting quick-tempered? In a word, God is in the business of changing hearts; therefore, we turn to God for re-aligning. God can help us find peace and give us ability to hold our tongues and tempers.

Sometimes we don't feel very strong though. We lose our cool and lash out. We have times we don't know what to do with our anger, as in where we put it, when it's bubbling over. Presbyterian minister Rev. Fred Rogers, as in "Mr. Rogers," taught to put anger constructively into making music. Some, like myself, aren't musically inclined. We may benefit from Rev. Tom Are, who had a wise thing to say about our anger and hatred. Tom said, "Every week we have a prayer of confession in a service. Most weeks you may not feel you need it. But, when you do, know that *this* is the best place. This [may be] the only place that it is safe to bring your anger, your hatred, your worst self. God can handle it. God *will* handle it."

Paul reassures us saying, God's power is perfected in our weakness. Surrender it to God. Gather up your: impatience, regrets, unfulfilled dreams and problems, even if it's dirty laundry, and lay them at Jesus' feet. This says, I'm not leaning on my own understanding, but acknowledging God, who can change me.

We are best served by taking this Proverb, along with Matthew's story, as challenging us to self-criticism. Is our temple a place where we're inviting in those who are in pain? Is our vision for the future including places where God is stirring us to speak out against an injustice like Jesus did? I dream that we might rouse our collective distain for something wrong in our community, so that figuratively we're turning over tables.

There is a season to be slow to anger for greater understanding and be tempered with grace and mercy. There's also a season to be called to action.

Individually and collectively, we can address issues affecting our community negatively, that we might positively build up a better place?

What are the issues God would change around our fine city? Could it be the problem of quick-tempered, gun violence? Would it be drugs, abuse, neglect? Insufficient housing or food? Trafficking?

It's naïve to think God is not tired, impatient and grieving over some injustices; things that need to be driven out and flipped over! What keeps God up at night, so to speak, ought to keep us up at night!

What is it going to be that angers us to be temple-changers?

Prayer: Merciful God, give us wisdom to know when is the right time to love and the right time to hate.

ⁱ Tom G. Long's Matthew commentary, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1997. This quotation and many other points from his commentary are throughout this sermon.