

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 13, 2022

Matthew 21:12-22

Our second text will come from the Gospel of Matthew. We'll get to it in just a moment, but for those who weren't with us last week, we began a Lenten sermon series that we've entitled Good Grief. We're working through Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief. They are really touchstones for us. We won't just be using her research; we'll be using a whole lot of different resources to help us navigate it, but we...we thought this season of Lent would be a good one for us to begin to navigate what it looks like to grieve communally and even personally. Each of you has brought some weight with you into this place. It sits on your shoulders this day. And so this day as we gather on this word that you will hear proclaimed, it will meet you, we pray, where you are. A couple things as we get started. We understand that grief, at least as Kubler-Ross explained it with her stages, can certainly be a response to...to death, but grief is also a response when we have any sort of loss, right? So last week I named a couple of people that are important in the life of Idlewild—just a few. I didn't want to go through a laundry list of people that we've lost over the last several years because I would have forgotten somebody that was really important to one of you. The reality is, though, that...that beyond death, we've had a number of other losses: people that just have had to move on and go to other places, right? Just this week I was speaking with a church member, who in the midst of the pandemic had to up and move to be closer to their children. They didn't want to leave Memphis. They didn't want to leave Idlewild, but they had to. So there they were grieving not a death but the loss of their church home. We're grateful for technology that allows us to connect, but we know it's not the same. So this day as we begin to navigate this, we need to remember something. Sometimes grieving death is actually slightly easier than just a nebulous loss. Right? There's something final about death, whereas other losses that we experience—people moving away or maybe finding a new call, those are more difficult. People are still there, and yet our relationships have changed. As we begin to explore anger together, you need to know that...that this stage for us, I think, is particularly important because it has the potential to impact the people around us, people in our sphere that we love deeply, that we care for. How it is that we process and navigate anger can have a real impact on our neighbors and our loved ones and our family. So this morning's message, I think, is particularly important for us. It's why we need to talk about anger together. There are two scenes here in the Gospel of Matthew, the 21st chapter. We're going to read from verse 12 through 22. You're gonna have two distinct scenes. These take place just after the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem for the Passover meal or for the celebration of Passover, excuse me, that day that we'll celebrate just about four weeks from now with palms and loud music and celebration. Verse 12— 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 have made 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

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 13, 2022

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?”

He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, 'How did the fig tree wither at once?' Jesus answered them, 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be lifted up and thrown into the sea", it will be done.

Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.'

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

As an eighth grader I made the varsity tennis team. It was an accomplishment that I told a lot of people about. I didn't tell them that there wasn't a junior varsity or an eighth-grade tennis team. We only had one team. I played number two doubles a few times on a modestly talented team. I was at the bottom of the list. What I lacked in talent, I did not make up for in effort. I did not practice enough. I did not take enough lessons. I was not a gifted tennis player. I played for a very long time though picked up the game when I was five, started playing with my uncle Dave in Delaware. Every summer we would spend weeks at this little place off of Bethany Beach, Delaware, playing tennis together. It was one of my favorite childhood memories. So when I made the team, I was excited. Then 9th grade came around, and some more talented 8th graders and 9th graders showed up. When the coach omitted my name from the list of team members, I was crushed. I was 15 years old. I was on a set of tennis courts right beside the pavilion which was our ice-skating rink, and I remember that I was inconsolable. I could not stop crying. I was 15. I didn't even love tennis, but something about not making the team crushed me. I remember sitting on the court not wanting to leave. Practice needed to begin, and all I could do was just cry.

A buddy of mine who was on the team, he finally helped me pack up my rackets and hopped in my truck and I drove home. A decade later I hadn't stepped foot onto a tennis court. The sport that I'd played from the age of five had gotten none of my attention. I was 25, and a pretty girl wanted to play tennis with me, so I grabbed my old tennis bag. I knew there were a couple of rackets in there, probably some dead tennis balls by that point. I unzipped it the day we were to play. I reached in to grab my old racket or what was left of my old racket. Someone had taken the time to tape the frame back together, and in the place of the strings was a piece of cardboard written in my father's handwriting, "Help, I have anger issues. Love, Dad."

I remembered the crying part. I remember the being inconsolable on that tennis court. I didn't remember what happened when I got home that day. I parked my truck, threw the bag out onto

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 13, 2022

the driveway, pulled out my favorite racket and proceeded to beat it against the side of our brick house. Took out the other one and did the same thing.

At some point, I guess they got back into the bag, and at some point, my dad must have found them, and at some point, he thought that he could have a craft project that at some time would make me laugh.

I put the racquets back in the bag. I remembered the sadness; I had forgotten the anger. I didn't even like tennis. I wasn't angry about not making the team. Last week we talked about—I began to talk about—one of the losses that I experienced in my early teen years. As I was thinking back this week about those years, they were full of angst and anger on basketball courts and on tennis courts and on golf courses anytime I played, which is interesting, right, that would be where I would let out anger. It would also be anger that filled my speakers in my 85 Blazer. With speakers that were blaring as loud as they could, Limp Bizkit's Break Stuff would blare through them. Aging myself, but there are 287 streams of that song by Limp Bizkit. Now, often when I quote music from this pulpit, many of you go and listen to it and then tell me how much you liked it. Don't go and listen to Limp Bizkit. You don't need to do that, okay, but know that an entire generation of people were addicted to the 90s version of alt rock that would become harder and more angry over time. It was the way in which we played our angst and our anger, anger at what I'm not quite sure, but it was present and it was real.

And so we meet Jesus just after the triumphal entry making his way into this place where he would worship God. He doesn't make his way in quietly and take his seat in the pew and begin to pray. He doesn't do that. He walks in and he sees money changers there, who, by the way, needed to be there. This is Passover. Hundreds of thousands of people are coming from all different places. They are to pay a tax, and to pay that tax they must do it in...in a token, in a coin that is native to that area, so they bring their coins, and they exchange them. We've all done this if we traveled internationally. We have to do it. The problem wasn't that they were there; the problem was that they were charging exorbitant fees to do the exchange. The problem wasn't that they were present. It was that they were taking advantage of people. The temple is to be a microcosm of all humanity. It is to be a place of...of love and warmth and welcome, and Jesus walks in after a parade of palms, and what he finds is people being taken advantage of. Jesus is angry, and there's an anger born of injustice. He is angry at the exploitation of poor people.

If we look around the world, there are certainly countless reasons for this type of righteous anger, the kind that he had when he flipped over the tables.

When we see state legislatures enact laws that take away the rights of women to their own bodies, or we see them pass laws that endanger the well-being of trans children because of bigotry, or we see them threaten our water supply here in Memphis because of money and oil and votes, or when we watch Ukrainians forced to flee a war meant to destroy them, and people with dark skin meeting racism instead of welcome at borders, there's plenty of reason for this type of righteous anger, anger born of injustice. This sort of anger motivates us. It calls us to be

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 13, 2022

better than we already are, but there's another type of anger too that's happening in this time. It's an anger for Jesus born of grief. None of this is happening in a vacuum. In five days he will be nailed to a tree; and if you don't think that he was carrying with him a preemptive grief for what that would look like and if you don't think that also manifested itself as anger in that moment, it was about the money changers, but it wasn't just about the money changers. It was about exploitation and injustice, but it was also because of the loss that he knew was on the way.

Anger is part of the way that Jesus processed his grief.

Anger, it turns out, is our response when we do not want to experience the pain of loss, and it can be scary to witness some 2000 years later. We're proud of Jesus for walking in there and turning over the tables, but can you imagine having been in that place that day and seeing this one that you have followed, who was healed. The one that would be called the Prince of Peace turning over these tables. It had to be a scene scary to witness. We've seen the gentleness of his hands as he heals people, and now we see the way that they can be turned.

We must acknowledge, just as Jesus did, the impending loss.

Sometimes it's easier for us to be mad than sad, and if the scripture just unpacked this one piece, this one story of him turning over the tables, that'd be one thing; but we get this whole narrative. Jesus is not in a great place, y'all. He goes out to Bethany; he hopefully gets a good night's rest; he wakes up in the next day; he's hungry; he passes by a fig tree. What'd the fig tree do? Nothing. In fact, we're actually trying to be compassionate to the fig tree. It sounds like the fig tree was having a rough time.

The fig tree is not bearing the fruit that the fig tree is supposed to bear. Maybe it's a lack of water, maybe it's a lack of nutrition, maybe it's because the sun's too hot.

Whatever it is, it doesn't produce the fruit that he wants, and at once he kills it.

There's righteous anger, and then there's anger born of being tired, of things not being the way they're supposed to be. That's why I resonate so much with the psalmist in Psalm 44. That was a long psalm for us to go through, but if you...if you listened to it, there was this remembering that was happening from the psalmist of...of God's work in the past and how the people of God were protected by God. It wasn't their sword that protected them, but God's protection. And they remained faithful to God. The psalmist says, "We've continued to be faithful and yet yet now you turn from us. I've showed up to church every Sunday, and this is what's going to happen to me?"

The NRSV says "rouse yourself." The common English says, "Wake up, why are you sleeping, Lord? Get up. Don't reject us forever. Why are you hiding your face, forgetting our suffering and oppression? Look, we're going down to the dust. Our stomachs are flat on the ground. Stand up and help us." It's desperation and it's anger at God's absence, and for the psalmist, it is honest and

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 13, 2022

it is real; and, most critically, the psalmist assumes, as we ought to as well, that God can handle the anger.

The psalmist doesn't placate god. No, the psalmist takes their grief and balls it up and gives it to God as honestly as they can.

It was the first Father's Day after a fifteen-year-old boy lost his...his father to cancer. He was the oldest of four siblings. My friend, a pastor, called him up. She was a family friend. She was coming up to see him and his family, knowing that this day, this Father's Day, would be an important day. She called him up and she said, "What do you want to do today?" He said, "I'm just angry; I want to break some stuff."

She said okay, so about halfway between Chicago and Milwaukee, she stopped off at a Goodwill. She grabbed a tarp and a box full of plates and cups. When she arrived, they... they hung the tarp from the side of the family's barn. They went outside, and they spent the better part of an hour chucking plates and cups against the side of the barn.

She gave the box to the young man, and he just started throwing, with every throw letting out a bit of the anger that he had held in for the last several months. They got done and he sat down in a heap on the ground, and he looked over at her, and he said, "I guess we gotta clean it up now."

She looked back at him, and she said, "It's okay for you to feel your anger. It's okay and important for you to feel this emotion, but you need to know that you are responsible for your actions, so now we gotta clean it up. You're right."

When we talk about grief and we talk about anger as a stage within it, we need to pay attention. We need to pay attention to the ways in which we process this anger. We need to process it, but we need to be aware of the ways in which it can impact the people around us, the people that we love.

As we navigate this season of Lent, and as we move through these stages of grief, we need to be reminded that anger...anger is part of what we have to navigate; and it's not going to stop all of a sudden after we throw stuff against a barn or beat the heck out of a tennis racket against the wall of our house. It's not going to end. It's going to flow in and out of our lives. So we have to pay attention. We have to pay attention to... to examples for us in scripture like that of the psalmist, and we have to follow the psalmist's lead and also Jesus's lead. We have to be reminded that in the midst of our...our grief, God can handle all of the emotions, anger included. Like the psalmist, we need to know that God can handle all the things, all the emotions that we bring to God. We also need to know that Christ knows what it feels like to be angry. It wasn't just righteousness that turned over tables. It was preemptive grief for the loss that he would experience.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 13, 2022

There are plenty of reasons to look around and to be angry, but the more difficult challenge is to look within, to see the ways in which we are carrying that anger with us through our grief, perhaps not even knowing it.

As we walk this Lenten journey together, our calling, like Christ, is to feel that anger, to dig it up from deep within us, to express it in ways that are helpful, to get it out of our bodies.

And then to look at the damage and clean it up.

We are called to experience the emotions, and we are responsible for them as well.

So I zipped up those tennis racquets back in the bag. I still have them. They're on the top shelf of my laundry room right now. I haven't ever used them again. They're useless to me, but every time I go in there to do a load of laundry, they are staring right at me, reminding me that too is part of who I am. That that too, that anger is part of my journey. That too might pop up from time to time, and my calling as a follower of Christ is to experience it and to let it out and to trust that God can handle it. If there is goodness to be found in grief, it is that the God that we know in Christ Jesus can hold all of it for us. So my prayer, my hope for you today, is that you might mine deep within yourself to the places where you are carrying that angst and that anger, that you might allow it to be released, and that you might trust that God meets you there.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.