

March 11, 2012 - Go Make Room for Others

Good Morning Everyone! I have a little handout for you this morning. You don't need it right away, but you'll need it later on. Just pass them around. If the person sitting next to you has just run out to take someone out to class please take an extra copy and leave it on their chair.

I'm going to start this morning with a question. Ever get angry? That steam coming out of your ears kind of angry. Those things that just seem to really rub you the wrong way, they get under your skin; they grate on your nerves. Do you have some of those things in your life? I think some of you do based on your expressions. I don't get that angry that often. I get irritated commonly, but I don't get real angry. Occasionally I will rise to that level but, there's actually, in scripture, it might surprise you but there's a handful of occasions where the Gospel writers say that Jesus got angry. Our text this morning is one of those occasions. Sometimes it's hard for us to picture Jesus in that setting, in that context. We're used to seeing Jesus like this (holding a lamb) not so much like this (overturning a table). We're used to seeing Jesus as calm, serene and gentle, and so we can't help but wonder when we read the text (Matt. 21:12-17) that Brad read earlier. What is it about that story that managed to get Jesus SO riled up? That's the question that we're going to look at this morning.

People get angry about all sorts of things. I wanted to look for a good example of someone getting angry and this is what I came up with. This is a picture from last November during Grey Cup week. I wanted to show you the video but I couldn't because it was not PG rated either for violence or for language and so, I just got this still shot for you. This is during Grey Cup week at a CFL alumni luncheon that was actually a fundraiser for an awareness program that meets the needs of those who are less fortunate, which is a sad irony to this story. The two men in the picture are Joe Kapp and Angelo Mosca. These two men are 73 years old at the time of this skirmish. They were old rivals 50 years ago, playing football. It starts out when Joe Kapp gets on the stage and he sticks a flower in Angelo's face and Angelo kind of pushes that away and there's a little bit of back and forth and then Angelo swipes out with his cane and then Joe comes back and throws his microphone and a few punches and Angelo falls down and Joe kicks him in the hind end and they have people come and separate these two 73 year old men who are just going at it up on the stage. You've got to wonder, what is it that happened to these guys? Did someone say something just as they got up to speak? No! 50 years ago, in 1963 Angelo made a tackle on Willie Fleming that was perceived to be out of bounds and a little mean and it hurt Willie and Willie was out of the game and because of that tackle, Joe feels that they lost the Grey Cup. And so, for 50 years Joe Kapp has been angry because of this one event. Well, I hope that you don't carry your anger like that.

People get angry for all sorts of reasons. I was trying to think of one of the most common things that kind of gets people riled up a little bit. One of them came to my mind this week was: do you ever get angry when you go somewhere and you get overcharged like grossly overcharged for something? I went to one of the draws at the Brier this week and I bought a bottle of pop. I knew when I went up to the counter and bought this bottle of pop that I was

going to get hosed paying for it and I did. I paid something like \$3.75 for a bottle of pop. It's ridiculous. I went in knowing that so it didn't really get me angry. Sometimes being price gouged like that gets you riled up. I thought where else does that happen. The second place I remembered that happening quite frequently is at the airport. You know when you go to the airport that you don't want to buy anything that you don't have to. You bring everything with you that you can because if you buy anything at the airport you're guaranteed to pay way, way, more than it's worth. Perhaps the worst place for price gouging is, think of this in your mind and I'll see if you get it right. The worst place for price gouging is the concession stand at the movie theatre. You go to the movie theatre and you buy a cup of pop and a thing of popcorn, both of which cost cents each to make, and they charge you this exorbitant fee just to have your pop and your popcorn for the movie.

I actually had a friend back in B.C. and he liked to get groups of us together to go to the movies and you know how, when you get a popcorn, especially when you get one of the larger sizes, you get one free refill but it doesn't matter because it's so big that you never eat it all in one sitting anyways and who wants to leave in the middle of the movie to go and refill your popcorn. Well, what he would do is, he would get his popcorn and eat it and then he would save the bag. The next time he came to the theatre he would bring his bag with him. So, he would get these groups of like 12 or 15 people and we'd go to the movie theatre and we'd get our ticket and then we'd all stand there and he'd start handing out popcorn bags to everyone. There you go, go and get your popcorn. He was just so irritated at the cost of this thing that he tried to find a way to get around it.

All of these things we talked about, the price gouging; the overcharging at all of these places, none of these things hold a candle to what was going on at the Temple when Jesus arrived that day. There were two things that upset Jesus when He got to the Temple that day. The first of them was the money changers that were there. To really get a sense of what was going on here, I need to give you some background and some context for it. As we go through this, I think you're going to see, you're going to start to feel a little bit agitated yourself, perhaps, as we start to describe what exactly was going on there. At the Temple, everyone had to pay a Temple tax once a year and it usually came around Passover that the Temple tax was due. The tax was one half shekel, that's how much you were supposed to pay for every adult. Typically, about a month before, they would set up booths in all the different towns and villages so if you wanted to pay your Temple tax there, you could. But if you waited too long, like some of us do with our income tax and you waited to the last minute, the booths aren't in the towns anymore and you had to go to Jerusalem and pay your Temple tax at the Temple. Now, you could use all sorts of currency at the market around town, you could use Jewish currency or Greek currency or Roman currency, or whatever kind of currency you had. You could use that at the market to buy things but at the Temple to pay the Temple tax, you could only use one specific kind of currency. It was known as the Tyrian Shekel and it was minted by the Jews, specifically to pay the Temple tax. This was the coin that you had to use. It was 95% pure silver, as opposed to all the other coins that were only about 80% pure silver. The rules specified that you had to get one of these specific coins that was stamped, you couldn't just pay the equivalent amount in

like a silver nugget or something. It even specified that you cannot use a chipped coin. So if your coin is a little damaged, a little chipped, you can't use that one, you have to use another one. So what would happen obviously, when it came time to pay the Temple tax, not a lot of people would have these shekels on hand and so, they would have to exchange their currency and essentially buy one of these shekels. Well, the Temple tax was a half shekel which roughly equates to \$175.00 in our present day money. That was how much they had to pay. And so, you would bring your money and buy one of these things worth \$175.00, but they would charge you \$25.00 just to exchange your currency into the Temple currency. And the part that I like best was, if you didn't have exact change, if you paid in a currency and expected some change back, you paid an extra \$25.00 for exact change service fee. And so, you could pay up to \$50.00 service fee on top of the \$175.00 you were paying for the Temple tax. But, here's the part of the deal that even rich Uncle Pennybags, the Monopoly guy, would be proud of. You see, there was a limited supply of these Temple shekels. So, every year, if you happened to have one, you would never use it to buy anything else cause you knew you needed it to pay your Temple tax at the end of the year. No one else would ever pay you with one cause they needed it to pay their Temple tax. So, if you came to Jerusalem and you happened to have one of these Tyrian shekels you would use that to pay your Temple tax. If you didn't have one, you would pay the service fees so you could buy one and then you would go and you would pay your Temple tax. Now, everyone who was an adult Jew had to do this, so, think of this, next year when it comes time to pay the Temple tax, who is holding most of these shekels? The Temple! And so, the Temple via the money changers would sell them back to the people so that the people could buy them, plus an exchange fee, and give them back to the Temple. Now, if that wasn't so corrupt, you would have to admire the brilliance of that scheme.

Well, the second thing that was upsetting to Jesus, the second group of people, was the animal merchants who were in the Temple. Now, you had to have animals for certain sacrifices and doves were one of the common ones that people would use. When it came to your animal sacrifices you had two choices. You could use animals that were brought, or animals that were bought. So, if you wanted to, you could buy an animal outside the Temple and use that, or you could buy one inside the Temple and use that. The only catch is, that your animal had to be 'spotless and without blemish' and to decide which animals were spotless and without blemish, the Temple had inspectors. The inspectors would look at the animals and say 'yes, this one is okay' or 'no, this one is not okay' to use in the sacrifice. But the thing was, it was almost a guaranteed certainty that if you bought your dove outside the Temple and brought it in and showed it to the inspector, the inspector would say "no, I'm sorry, that one does not qualify. That's not spotless and without blemish. But there is a stall right over there where you could go ahead and purchase a dove that I'm sure would be good enough for the sacrifice." So, that's what happened.

It's kind of like when you go to the airport and you have to pass through that security check and they won't let you take much of anything through that point? It always kind of irritates me because I can buy a bottle of pop for \$1.50 or something or cheaper if I get it at a grocery store. I could buy that bottle of pop and it wouldn't be opened, it could be full and sealed and pure and

I get to the security gate and they say “sorry, you can’t take that with you through the gate.” And so, I have to leave it and I walk through the gate and I buy an identical bottle of pop and it costs me \$3.75 or more inside the secure area. Well that’s kind of what was going on at the Temple except much, much, worse. You see, an animal bought outside the Temple at the regular market, a dove could cost as little as \$100.00 equivalent in our money. The doves bought inside the Temple could cost as much as \$1,900.00 equivalent. Here’s the kicker, I had to check this out and verify it because I could hardly believe it when I read it. The place where these doves were being sold was known as the Bazaar of Annas. It was named that because all of the booths selling doves there, were owned by the House of Annas, who just happened to be the High Priest. If it wasn’t so corrupt, you would have to admire this scheme that they put together.

It wasn’t actually only the price gouging that was upsetting happening that day. To understand the rest that was going on you have to take a quick little tour of the Temple. So walk with me if you would, through the courts and through the Temple. We use the same word, Temple, for the two things, one is talking about the specific Temple building and we also say Temple and your Bible will read ‘Temple’ referring to the Temple courtyards and everything. So there’s kind of two things. Jesus probably came through the South gate and came up into this area and He came up some stairs and enter into what’s known as the Royal Stoa. It was a long hall with four rows of 40 thick, large tall pillars. And that’s where you would first walk into when you came up into the Temple area. Then from there you would walk into the Court of the Gentiles, which was all this kind of flat empty area around the middle. Anyone could come into that area but, if a Gentile, a non-Jew, walked past that barrier right there, which goes all around the building, it was an immediate death sentence for a Gentile for coming that close to the Temple. Next, you had what was known as the Court of the Women, and appropriately, you had to walk through the ‘Beautiful Gate’ to get into the ‘Court of the Women’. Any Israelite could go into that area. Following the Court of the Women, was the Court of the Israelites and any Israelite men could go in there for the Temple assemblies and services they had there. Past the Court of the Israelites was the Court of the Priests and that’s where the alter and all of those things were. The Court of the Priests held the actual Temple building and the Temple building was divided into two parts. There was the Holy Place, where the Priests would go in and offer sacrifices. Then there was the Most Holy Place, where only the High Priest once a year, could go into. So, that’s kind of the layout of the Temple area.

Now, the story Brad read for us earlier about Jesus being in the Temple, that likely occurred in the Court of the Gentiles, or perhaps in the colonnade that surrounds it. Now, to really appreciate what was going on there, I want to try a little experiment this morning. It might stretch you a little bit. But I want you to participate to get the full effect of what is going on. So, if you would, please take your little yellow card out. Please just take a minute to read what your card says. Don’t do it, just read. Have it clear in your mind what your card has instructed you to do? On the count of three, I would like you to follow the instructions on your card. (Loud pandemonium reigns!!!! Everyone shouting; etc.) How did that make you feel? Was it disturbing? Distracting? Disruptive? Did you find it rather chaotic and

uncomfortable? If you did I apologize for your discomfort but you needed to experience that to understand what Jesus was so upset about. I've heard this story talked about many times and I've heard it explained many times, but not until I stood up here at the focal point of all of your voices, which I didn't really plan out very well, but not till I stood up here and was in the midst of all of that chaos and sound, did I really appreciate what was going on in this story. And that was without all of the birds chirping and all of the lambs baaing, and all of the other noise that might have been around. A few of you had a card that asked you to meditate on a certain passage out of Habakkuk. Put up your hand if you got one of those cards. Anyone want to convey to me that went for you, trying to meditate on the words "The Lord is in His Holy Temple, let all of the earth keep silent before Him" as that noise was going on. Someone want to share with me how that went for you? (Couldn't concentrate. Too Loud. Too distracting. Give me a headache.) You need to be able to imagine that because the bottom line was that, with all of those people and all of those merchants, it was stinking loud and it was probably just plain a little bit stinking because you had all of the animals there as well.

Now, just imagine, you are a Gentile and you have come to the Temple perhaps from a long distance and this is the only place you can go to worship God and draw near to Him. Imagine you are the Ethiopian Eunuch who has come all the way, in Acts Chapter 8 we read about him. Came all the way from Ethiopia to see the Temple and to worship God and you get there and you come in and you are ready to draw close to God and to worship Him and to maybe find out the answers that you've been looking for. Is this the one true God that I've been looking for? Is this the one who can lead me to the life that I desire? I just want to come and I want to pray and I want to worship and I walk through the doors and I'm greeted with what you just heard. Can you imagine that?

Well, the thing that made Jesus angry, was not actually the price gouging or the noise. Both of those would have really ticked me off. But that's not what upset Jesus the most. The thing that made Jesus angry, was people putting up road blocks that prevented other people from coming to God. Whether it was just the riotous noise in the Court of the Gentiles that prevented them from being able to worship God as they desired, or whether it was the prohibitive cost of the sacrifices that maybe prevented people or at least, were a great burden on people who maybe wanted to come and worship and offer their sacrifices and pay their Temple tax, except they know that they have to pay this exorbitant amount to make it happen. Whatever it was, these things made it from difficult to impossible for people to draw near to God and worship Him. Jesus was even more angry by the fact that the people putting up those road blocks were the very ones who were supposed to be leading people to God in the first place. You see, the religious leaders of Israel were supposed to be God's ambassadors. When I think of ambassadors the first image that comes to my mind are the taxis in India because they were based on a car model called the Ambassador for decades and decades so this is what I think of as an ambassador. Their job is to take people where they need to go. So that's the job of an ambassador taxi to take people where they need to go. Sometimes, quite often in India, I found, this is what they are doing (all stopped in traffic jam). They are blocking the road and they are blocking the way to where people need to go and that's exactly

what was happening in our story. The religious leaders who were the ones who were supposed to be taking people to where they needed to be, who were taking people leading them towards God, instead they were blocking the way. They were preventing people from drawing near to God and where they needed to be. The religious leaders of Israel were meant to be God's ambassadors. They were meant to be His representatives; His spokesmen. They were supposed to speak on behalf of God and carry His message to the people. But they had lost sight of God's message and substituted their own. God's message was very simple "anyone can come to me". Their message became "we are the elite of God's people and if you don't have it all together like we claim to have it all together, then there is no place for you in God's house." And in response to that, Jesus declares, the scriptures say: "My Temple will be called a house of prayer." The other Gospels include the phrase "For all nations". My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations but you have turned it into a den of robbers. This is supposed to be a place where you can come and find God. You're supposed to be the ones who lead people to God but instead you have staged a coup in God's house. The term here for 'robber' or some versions say 'thief' isn't actually the word for thief as in somebody who steals something, it is actually the word that is often used for insurrectionist, for someone who is leading a revolt. It's the same word that is used to describe Barabbas, you might remember Barabbas was brought out when Jesus was on trial and Pilot gave the people a choice between Jesus and Barabbas and Mark describes Barabbas as a revolutionary who committed murder in an uprising. And that's what this word indicates. Also, you remember you might have read how on the cross there was a thief who called out to Jesus, it's the same word that's used here but stealing is not an offence that is punishable by crucifixion, insurrection and revolt and revolution, are. And so, it's that same word, it's that same connotation, of rebellion, that is entailed, when Jesus says "You have turned this into a den of robbers". That's exactly what Jesus accuses the religious leaders of the temple of. And that's what made Him angry. People being kept away from God by those who were supposed to be leading the way.

When we look at the other stories in the New Testament where the Gospel writers describe Jesus as angry we see this underlying pattern that emerges. In Mark 3:1-6:

"Another time, Jesus went into the Synagogue. A man with a shrivelled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus so they watched Him closely to see if He would heal on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand 'Stand up in front of everyone.'" Then Jesus asked them "Which is lawful to do on the Sabbath, to do good or to do evil. To save a life or to kill." But they remained silent. He looked around with them in anger and deeply distressed by their stubborn hearts, and He said to the man "Stretch out your hand" and he stretched it out and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians, how they might kill Jesus."

You see here a man in need of God's touch and Jesus' response is "I have come to be God's ambassador. I have come to bring His message. I have come to heal the hurting; to mend the broken; to restore the fallen. And the religious leaders say "sorry, today is not a good day for us. God's not available to you right now. Maybe you should just come back another time."

And that, made Jesus angry.

Later on in Mark 10:13-16 we read this:

“One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so he could touch and bless them. But the disciples scolded the parents for bothering him. When Jesus saw what was happening, he was angry with his disciples and he said to them ‘Let the little children come to me. Don’t stop them for the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. I tell you the truth, anyone who does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.’ Then he took the children in his arms and he placed his hands on their heads and he blessed them.”

This time, it’s Jesus’ disciples who have wandered off the track. Parents bring their children to Jesus and the disciples say “Not now. He’s too busy with the important people right now. He’s got better things to do than give you his attention. Quit bothering him.” And that made Jesus angry. He was never too busy for anyone. Everyone is important and significant in his eyes.

So, the thing that really upsets Jesus is when barriers are put up between people and God, particularly when those are put up by people who are to lead people to God. The message for us this morning shouldn’t be too hard for us to see.

1. No matter who you are, or what has gone on in your past, never let anyone tell you that God has no place for you. Jesus himself said: “It was written a long time ago that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day, but it’s also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of His name to all nations (that means everyone) beginning in Jerusalem.” There is forgiveness of sins for ALL who repent.

2. If you are a follower of Christ, you are an ambassador. You should be familiar with this passage if you’ve been with us the last couple of weeks. It’s what Paul describes for us:

“If you are a Christ follower, we are Christ’s ambassadors. God is making His appeal through us. So we speak for Christ when we plead” (and I put in there, we plead to everyone) “Come back to God for made him who has no sin be sin for us, so that we all could be made right with God, through Christ.” 2Cor. 5:20-21

You are commissioned to speak on God’s behalf and to share His message. God sent Christ so that we, everyone of us, regardless of race or I.Q. or income tax bracket, or fashion taste or personal histories, could be made right with God. We cannot simply replace or override God’s message with our own. We have been called to lead people to God and when we create barriers and road blocks on people’s spiritual journey, it is not only not what God wants, it is the seeds of insurrection.

And as I pondered that this week, my initial thought was, “What a relief, we don’t charge an

overpriced admission to come to Church on Sunday. We don't scam people, we don't restrict people by age or by gender or by race. We don't crank up the radio in the Fireside room and re-direct all visitors to sit in there during worship time. We're in the clear. We've kind of got this covered."

But then I began to wonder. Do we get busy chatting with our friends and fail to make that visitor important or welcome? Do we speak in 'churchy' language and conduct rituals that, while very meaningful to us, just don't make any sense without explanation? Do we have gossip and arguments among us that make it so that all people can see is bickering, instead of God's love? Are we too busy asking 'What can I get out of this Church' that we don't ask 'What do I need to put in to this Church?' And then, I began to ask what road blocks do I put up as an individual? Do I have that air of perfection that Brad was talking about earlier? Do I walk around looking like I've got it all together? There's two possible results to that: People will either see through it and realize that I'm a fraud and think that I am hypocritical or just acting holier than thou or that I'm claiming to have the answers all the time but I really don't and because of that, they won't want to have anything to do with me or Christianity or God. Or else, they will get conned by or believe that I am actually as perfect as I'm pretending to be and decide "I can never measure up to that. I can never make it into that Church. I could never be acceptable to that God if I've got to live up to that kind of standard." Do I put up a road block by professing Christianity but living no different than anyone else around me. Or by indulging myself while ignoring the needs of others. Do I put up a road block by having a sour disposition and a critical attitude, which blinds people to God's graciousness and the joy found in Jesus. Do I put up a road block by doing and saying, nothing.

Now, your list may look different than mine. But the bottom line is, the things that I get upset about and worked up about, often aren't the things of greatest concern to Jesus. Conversely, the things that I often let slide or write off, may be just the things that matter most in God's eyes. And this realization to me is not a burden. It is a liberation, because it simplifies my job as Christ's ambassador. My job is simply this: Represent Christ and communicate his message to everyone who I see and come in contact with. His message that anyone who comes to God with an open and contrite heart will be welcomed with open and loving arms because in God's house there is ALWAYS room.

We want to end this morning with about two minutes of quiet, in contrast to what we read in our story today. During this time I encourage you to spend time drawing nearer to God, opening your heart to God, reflect on your role as an ambassador.