

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
August 14, 2022

Jeremiah 23:23-29

Psalm 82

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

“Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

There was a long article in the Washington Post last month about all the things that make the Midwest distinctive. It talked about lakes and fish and snowmobiles. But I was surprised that it didn't mention the thing which I think makes the Midwest unique above all the different regions of this country—our deep distaste and subsequent avoidance of anger.

If you doubt me, just look really closely the next time a Midwesterner tells you that they're fine. Imagine that moment when you know full well that your friend is angry. And you ask them how they're doing, and they respond, “I'm fine.” Note the squinted eyes, the tensed shoulders, the smile that looks just a little bit aggressive. As a rule of thumb, when a Midwesterner says they are fine, they are usually anything but.

Most Midwesterners that I know—and I'll include myself in this category—do not like to be angry at someone; do not like it when someone is angry at them; and don't even like it when two unrelated people are being angry somewhere near us. We will go to great lengths to avoid or shut down anything that seems a little heated or too annoyed.

Which is a shame, because just like joy or sorrow or hope, anger is part of the mystery that makes us human. I see it mainly playing out in our lives in two different ways. Believe it or not, I see anger as something that can be a connector. Sometimes someone will come into my office and let me know that they're really angry with me. And you know what? Chances are that I'm a little annoyed with them as well. And just like that, we have something in common. After we're able to get our anger out on the table, I find that usually the real issues start to come up—maybe we're grieving or sad or lonely. But when we finally are able to name the anger in the room, we can start to come together and to connect.

The other way that I see anger operating in our lives is as a prod or a spur to action. You hear about people becoming activists in their local schools or government after something goes wrong that makes them really angry—maybe it's a banned book or lack of access to services for a portion of the population. Anger like that can be clarifying and can be a catalyst for change.

It's this second kind of anger that I see in the Gospel this morning. Jesus is pretty steamed at his followers. He tells them that they seem to have no problem predicting the weather. When there are dark clouds, we all know there is going to be rain. But he can't figure out why people who are so good at predicting the weather cannot also predict what is happening in society. Look

around at all the signs. There are major problems in the world—in Jesus’ time and in ours—and why can’t we see the problems and then act? Our lack of attention to the issues of the day brings out a furious side of Jesus. Imagine being in the presence of your friend Jesus, with eyes blazing, words loud and a little harsh—maybe even some hand wringing or a little spittle at the end of His mouth. Imagine being confronted with your teacher, your master, your God being furious with you for something that you failed to do.

And this is pretty hard for us Midwesterners to take. We don’t like it when a neighbor is annoyed with us. How much worse when it is God almighty?

But perhaps that is exactly the prod that we need. Perhaps we need a little anger. I have to say, it sure beats hopelessness, and I prefer it to ignorance. I think a little anger at the way the world is is a defensible position for a Christian to hold. When I see the fires across the southwest, when I see the history of the Native American boarding school system come to light, when I see a national disregard for the education of young people, when I see autocrats halfway around the world going to war—all of that does make me angry. And I think it makes God angry.

I wonder if this kind of galvanizing anger is something like a camp fire. If any of you have been in charge of putting together a fire, you know that a balance is needed. If you place too much wood on your tiny flame, it will smother. But if you don’t put enough on, you won’t be able to roast your marshmallows. So there is a way in which a Christian needs a good amount of anger to move through the world—not so much that she can’t function, but not so little that we become complacent or numb.

I think today’s Gospel story is a call to anger. A holy anger that burns enough that we are on fire for justice and mercy and goodness in our personal lives all the way out into the community and even the world. There is a lot to be angry about. And, as Jesus says, we probably do know what the problems in this world are. It can sometimes be hard to start addressing them.

So, even though we are good Midwesterners, I will leave us with a Gospel of anger today. Get made enough to make change in the community. Who know, maybe that fire in your belly looks something like the fire of the Holy Spirit. Amen.