

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

August 25, 2024

**BIG FEELINGS:**  
**Anger**  
Dr. Jo Forrest



**BIG FEELINGS:**

**Anger**

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2024 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: August 25, 2024

Mark defines Jesus' ministry as "good news." In our quest to be good Christians we strive to be like Jesus and bring good news.

This conjures pleasant images like carrying a sheep on our shoulders while wearing a white flowing robe – that's the mural I saw in the Lutheran church while growing up – and not down in the muck struggling with the stubborn animal.

We want to share good news with our neighbors yet not disrupt the community.

We want to be in a sanctuary, to share worship yet not confront those who twist holy scripture to suit their purposes.

Mark's good news begins in the burning sensations that more often make us uncomfortable. His good news might gnaw within us. The transforming work to embody grace and love begins in deep within our flesh.

Jesus feels compassion. At times, he stomps away indignant. He expresses sorrow. Other times, depression covers his face. He swings from being full of joy, to deeply moved. Filled with grief, he even weeps.

Through him, we see a kaleidoscope of feelings of what it means to be human and to be made in the image of God. God creates us to feel deeply. These sensations draw us closer to God.

Let's return to Mark's good news.

By the second chapter, Jesus' captured everyone's attention with healing miracles putting him on a collision course with the Pharisees. Then anger erupts.

*Dear God,*

*You created us with a vast array of feelings.*

*Some comfortable and pleasing.*

*Other feelings burn within us until we want to explode.*

*Teach us through your holy word what it means to feel anger.*

*Send your spirit among us as we hear this story of Jesus so that we learn from him. Amen.*

### **Mark 2:23 - 3:6**

<sup>23</sup>One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. <sup>24</sup>The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" <sup>25</sup>And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food?"

<sup>26</sup>He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions."

<sup>27</sup>Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; <sup>28</sup>so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

<sup>1</sup>Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand.

<sup>2</sup>They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. <sup>3</sup>And Jesus said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” <sup>4</sup>Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?”

But they were silent. <sup>5</sup>He looked around at them **with anger**; he was grieved at their **hardness of heart** and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

<sup>6</sup>The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, **how to destroy him**.

\*\*\*

Mark’s portrait of Jesus should startle if not unsettle us.

What is he doing? Feeding disciples? Not really. The few grains they consume are like snacking on a bag of chips you picked up from Sheetz while on a road trip.

The thing is, they are not starving, they’re just snacking.

Jesus seems to be pushing for this conflict. When he flings King David at the Pharisees, he misquotes scripture with a wrong name for the priest and muddles facts.

Did he make this up, to disarm the Pharisees? To provoke them? Seminary professors often do that. Lots of teachers unsettle us to capture our attention.

The people who oppose Jesus are not outside skeptics, but earnestly religious people and he taunts them.

As a necessary sidebar, before we go further in casting these Pharisees, in particular, and Judaism in general in the harsh light of judgement, we must caution that this story never justifies antisemitism. Nothing in our holy scriptures promotes antisemitism. Throughout his ministry, Jesus remains thoroughly Jewish. His disciples and early followers are Jewish. Jesus welcomes Pharisees to become his followers.

New Testament scholar and orthodox Jew, Amy-Jill Levin takes us to the root word of “Pharisee” to understand why they are labeled as such and what motivates them.

“Pharisee” means someone who interprets the law. “Pharisee” also describes someone who seeks to understand the cultural and social forces that could corrupt faith.

That sounds like what we still do today as Christians. We continue to interpret scripture. We prayerfully examine



worldly ideals that could compromise our faith or damage human life.

The religious leaders are not repressive men hoping to send everyone to hell except themselves. We prefer to portray them that way, to keep ourselves above the fray.

Jesus confronts what they do, not who they are. He wants them and us as the reader to realize what's at stake. It's not about being right. It's not about division. It's much deeper.

This encounter brings me to recall a friend who works as an executive coach. She has learned from experience that often, "The thing is not the thing."

Not a very erudite statement, but entirely memorable.

She'll ask a client, "What's really bugging you?" Is it the way someone on your staff abuses "reply-all" in emails or attempts to claim credit for the work. Usually not.

Then she pushes. Whatever *thing* enrages someone to lash out is often a foil, a justifiable response and not the *thing* that causes them to burn with rage. The root of the anger is usually something much deeper. Until they uncover the anxiety, the ambition, or the blind spot, her client will continue to stumble.

From her advanced training and the expectation to apply sophisticated insight to coach senior levels. She often finds, "the thing is not the thing."

What's often bugging us today? Getting caught in traffic trying to turn left and no one reciprocates with the grace we routinely offer of the Pittsburgh-left?

Or is it the way outsiders or even insiders in our community behave that threatens our comfort or the value of our homes.

“The thing is not the thing.”

What's bugging us? Is it really the stories in old books that compel questions in young minds, so we ban books? Is a curious mind too dangerous, or is it the threat losing control when we unmask the truth?

Anger seems to boil around us in road rage, social media rage, in rage thrown at school boards and teachers. Pervasive anger is fraying our community, family, and relationships.

And before anyone thinks this is partisan, we seem to be united in our awareness of anger and the trajectory it takes in violence and cementing hate.

Once anger was considered among the seven deadly sins but is now treated more as a virtue than a vice.

Pastor and writer Frederick Buechner once observed:

Anger...To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are

given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a King. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

Like a poisonous berry, anger may taste sweet at first but inevitably turns bitter, inflicting more harm on the person who tastes it on those they target.

But anger is also tricky, because not all of it is inherently wrong.

In fact, there is such a thing as righteous anger, let's call it healthy anger. Healthy anger confronts evil while entrusting ultimate justice to God. It may convict someone of an act or a word, but it does not condemn. Healthy anger aims not to retaliate but to restore and protect what is good.

Toxic anger perpetuates evil; healthy anger combats it.

Why are the Pharisees so angry at Jesus?

The Israelite people remain under the iron fist of Rome.

At every turn they risk death if they don't bow to the pagan notion of Caesar as divine. And here comes one more prophet from the hinterlands whose behavior threatens their ability to control the rest of the Jews. If they lose control of them, they lose their safety.

These leaders perceive that Jesus' vision for life discredits the ridged controls that assure them they are doing things the right way, in being holy, and preserving the sacred community against anyone who might taint it.

To them, idolizing the Ten Commandments has become more important than tending a beloved child of God. So they weaponize religion and elevate the law over human life.

If we hold this under a microscope of "the thing is not the thing," we see fear. Fear ignites and keeps their rage simmering.

This whole story turns on Jesus' anger. Is he angry at their arguments, no? Jesus is angry at the "hardness of their hearts." They've allowed anger to isolate them from the very people they need and who need them.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus paints the ultimate portrait of healthy anger. He is gentle and meek, while also being indignant. He overturns tables in the temple, calls out hypocrisy, and confronts real injustice— in defense of the poor and disabled and widows and orphans.

Jesus' anger rises from a place of love.

Even when provoked or facing death, Jesus demonstrates an anger that burns from a merciful, compassionate heart.

*When rooted in love and guided by wisdom and truth, anger serves divine purposes.*

He invites us to imitate his balance of healthy anger and compassionate love, to refuse falling into bitter vengeance.

Story after story, healing after healing, miracle after miracle, Jesus chips away at those who would rather hold on to the past, who would rather claim righteous indignation when his good news threatens their control, who would literally rather kill him, than be transformed by his love.

Paul, a pharisee whose life changed by meeting the risen Christ gives us two simple imperatives, “be angry, but do not sin.” (Eph 4:26).

The first is to be angry. He commands us to be angry.

Give into the anger that leaves us shaking because a sacred trust is being broken; because those who have done no harm are being gratuitously harmed; because wrongs are being committed, and the ones committing the wrongs deny they are wrong.

Anger in such instances is not merely permissible. It is obligatory.

Anger is the price for paying attention. It is the rage that ought to come out, because, when faced with an outrage, it is a sin *not* to be angry.

Being a good Christian, to embody the good news, may put us on a collision course with those who will do anything to preserve their little fiefdom.

Our task is to be humble and strong in our anger. Be humble to the divine intent. Let the burn escalate for the good news and not our individual egos. Remain strong to persevere through the journey. In the end, love always wins.

\*\*\*

While researching this sermon, I am indebted to many scholars whose insight inspired me. I commend the following:

Cole Riley Arthur, *This Here Flesh*, (New York: Convergent, 2022).

Amy-Jill Levin, *The Gospel of Mark*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2023).

Mark Ramsey, "Anger, Church and the Gospel," *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2020.

Scott Saul, "Be Angry, But Sin Not," *The Scott Sauls Blog*, Substack, June 23, 2024.





**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**

2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630  
[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)