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Act Up

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was founded in March 1987 in New York City.

Its founders were mostly gay men and women who wanted to raise awareness of the AIDS pandemic – but their methods weren't to simply print flyers and put out infomercials

No, ACT UP gained worldwide attention for their acts of public, dramatic civil disobedience

On September 14, 1989, seven ACT UP members infiltrated the New York Stock Exchange and chained themselves to the VIP balcony to protest the high price of the only approved AIDS drug, AZT.<sup>1</sup>

Several days after the protest, the company that produced the AZT medication lowered the price

On October 11, 1988, ACT UP had an incredibly successful demonstration – both in terms of size and in terms of national media coverage – when it successfully shut down the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) for a day<sup>2</sup>

It's estimated that between 1,100 and 1,500 protestors blocked doors and roads leading to the facility chanting “hey, hey, FDA, how many people have you killed today?”

leaders said that their protest at the FDA saw a major change in how government agencies, like the FDA and NIH, included LGBT people in their decision-making and sought their input in programming

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ACT\\_UP](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ACT_UP)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

On December 10th, 1989 ACT UP had one of its greatest and most controversial events when it staged their “Stop the Church” action at St. Patrick’s Cathedral during Sunday morning mass<sup>3</sup>

The protest was both against the Roman Catholic Church in general, and specifically directed towards Cardinal John O’Connor who – in the midst of the AIDS pandemic – condemned the practice of teaching safe sex in the New York Schools including condemning the use of condoms

"Good morality is good medicine" Cardinal O’Connor would say, and the gay community knew that such teachings were not only hurtful they were harmful

Cardinal O’Connor wielded a great deal of power within the city of New York and had the ear of local and regional politicians as much as he had the ear of people of faith

In response to the harm of Cardinal O’Connor’s words and actions and the stance of the Roman Catholic Church, ACT UP planned a protest of civil disobedience for a Sunday morning when Cardinal O’Connor was set to be preaching at the Cathedral

Approximately 4,500 protestors gathered outside the cathedral with signs and chants

A smaller number of protestors were able to enter the Cathedral as worshipers – and 2 minutes into Cardinal O’Connor’s sermon, members of ACT UP began a “die in” – laying in the aisle to show the number of people dying from AIDS and from the harmful teachings and practices of churches like the Roman Catholic Church

Unphased by their actions, Cardinal O’Connor continued preaching

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stop\\_the\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stop_the_Church)

So, ACT UP members amplified their actions by blowing whistles, standing on pews, and chanting slogans like “stop killing us! Stop it!”

One member even took the consecrated host out of his mouth at communion, crumpled it to pieces and dropped it on the ground before laying down to encumber others coming up for the sacrament

In all, 111 protestors were arrested including 43 from inside the church who, many of them, had to be removed using stretchers because they refused to move

“I don’t approve of such goings on in a holy place” parishioners said as they left the service “Blasphemous is the word”<sup>4</sup>

Much of the public reaction to ACT UP’s “Stop the Church” protest was similarly negative, public officials condemned their actions and some other gay and lesbian organizations disagreed with the tactic

Yet, "ACT UP activists now say the St. Patrick's protest changed the way many Americans viewed the Catholic Church. It was no longer untouchable, and its policies – on everything from condoms and abortion to gay marriage and women priests – were no longer sacrosanct."

Filmmaker Jim Hubbard, a member of ACT UP and director of the documentary “United in Anger: A History of ACT UP,” said, "I wasn't clear about what going inside the church would add at the time. But now I think that the shock of going inside and confronting the cardinal really worked. It helped bring ACT UP to mainstream attention. It brought the crisis to a point where the government and the mainstream media really had to start dealing with it."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-526-8k74t6g61f>

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stop\\_the\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stop_the_Church)

Some 1900 years before ACT UP took their protest to the halls of St. Patrick's Cathedral, another protest took place in the most sacred halls in Jerusalem: Passover was near, so "Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!'"

I wonder if those in the Temple or in Jerusalem for the holy celebrations responded to Jesus' actions the way the parishioners at St. Patrick's did: "I don't approve of such goings on in a holy place" "Blasphemous is the word"

Found in all four gospels, the story of Jesus flipping tables and cleansing the Temple is often interpreted as a response to the corruption of those making exchanges in the sacred space – an act in Matthew, Mark, and Luke which leads to Jesus' arrest

But, in John, rather than coming at the end of his ministry, this story of Jesus making a cord and driving everyone out of the Temple is told at the beginning of Jesus' ministry – as his second public act only after turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana

Mary Hinkle Shore, theologian and scholar, writes that in John's gospel "Jesus is not acting against corruption, or at least he is not *only* acting against corruption. He is involved in performance art. Jesus brings temple activity to a standstill in order to point to another holy place altogether."<sup>6</sup>

Jesus is involved in performance art to point to another holy place altogether: himself

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-john-213-22-4>

In the other gospels, Jesus' actions to cleanse the temple lead to him getting arrested – in John, Jesus' whip and flipping tables lead to him being noticed

Jesus is the dwelling place of God

In a place so caught up in its rituals, so fixated on dogma and orthodoxy, so familiar with the lessons and liturgy that things become rote – how is Jesus to get our attention?

Performance art

Stated somewhat differently, Debie Thomas writes that “Jesus is not about ‘business as usual.’ Jesus is not a protector of the status quo. Jesus has no interest in propping up institutions of faith that elevate comfort and complacency over holiness and justice.”<sup>7</sup>

“No,” she continues. “Jesus is a disruptor. A leveler. An upender. As his disciples immediately realize when he throws out the moneychangers and occupies the temple, zeal is what animates the Messiah. Fervor, not casualness.”

And he is not zealous for the sake of Zeal, or feverish for the sake of Fervor.

Jesus makes for darn sure that his followers know that he is the embodiment of God - the embodiment of love, the incarnation of grace and we should not rest on our laurels or get too comfortable in our seats so long as there is justice to be had

In our very white, very Western form of Christianity, good faith often looks like quiet devotion, acts of service – our liturgy is well-ordered and well-followed

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2937-not-in-god-s-house>

Acts like those of ACT UP in the 1980's and Jesus in the original aughts stir us up and make us uncomfortable

“isn't there a calmer way to handle such a moment?” we might ask

In her widely influential essay, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” feminist theologian Beverly Harrison writes: “The important point is that where feeling is evaded, where anger is hidden or goes unattended, masking itself, there the power of love, the power to act, to deepen relation, atrophies and dies.”<sup>8</sup>

Debie Thomas contributes: “[Jesus] doesn't use love and forgiveness as palliatives; he allows a holy anger to move him to action on behalf of a more robust, equitable, holistic, and impassioned spiritual practice. In the story of the temple cleansing, there is nothing godly about responding to complacency or injustice with passive acceptance or unexamined complicity.”

In this holy season of Lent, in this time of reflection and prayer, I wonder what ways our own faith lives and experiences need the jarring performance art of Jesus clearing the sanctuary and ACT UP chanting in our midst

How have we become complacent with injustice and numb to crises? What neighbors have we learned to ignore because it unsettles us and makes us uneasy?

How can Jesus get our attention to point us to another holy place altogether – point us toward the place of justice, the place of reconciliation, the place of liberation – point us toward God themself?

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

Jesus, disrupt our lives, cleanse the temples of our souls and bodies that we may hear you and see you, and that we may join you in your pursuit of justice and love.

Amen.