

The Inner Temple

Some years ago, I was teaching a class on conflict management to a large group of recently engaged couples at University Presbyterian Church. I led off with the provocative question, “What is your understanding of how Jesus handled conflict?” There was a brief pause and one well-meaning, idealistic couple yelled out, “Well, we all know what Jesus would do, he would turn the other cheek!” To which I answered, “And how is that working out for you?” To which, the young couple admitted, “Not very well!”

My experience with these young couples inspired me to do an exhaustive study of the New Testament to identify the different ways Jesus dealt with conflict. To my surprise, I began to see that Jesus did not have a one size fits all approach to handling conflicts. Sometimes he avoided conflict all together by slipping through the crowd because it was not yet time to confront. Sometimes he was able to negotiate “win/win” solutions. Other times he compromised—meeting people in the middle but challenging them to continue to grow.

Yes, sometimes he did in fact “turn the other cheek” in order to de-escalate a conflict situation or break free from an “eye for an eye” retaliatory interaction. But Jesus did get angry and frustrated, perhaps more that we realize or was recorded. He was especially passionate about the defense of the vulnerable and exploited in his society.

In today’s gospel story Jesus abandons the soft and gentle approach. He did not believe it would be effective. Perhaps he already tried the tactful, peace-making approach earlier in the day. His conscience could not let him walk away from the situation. He could no longer accept the status quo. Kingdom principles were at stake.

What was it about this set up at the temple that was so important for Jesus to address? First of all, a little context. It is important to note that the Temple at Jerusalem was enormous and considered one of the great marvels of the ancient world. It was the pride and joy of the mighty King Herod that Great who was rebuilding it, with slave labor I might add, during Jesus' lifetime. It was without a doubt Herod's most ambitious building project and a symbol of his power. The priestly class of Jewish leaders were part of the food chain as well and they blessed it. The Romans, conveniently, had a branch office on the temple grounds and profited greatly from religion.com. Archeologists have uncovered ample evidence that the Temple at Jerusalem, in addition to being the center of Jewish religious life, was in fact a huge and profitable marketplace just like it says in today's gospel lesson.

Let's take a deeper look at the economics of First Century Temple life. The religion as practiced at that time—like so many ancient religions—was dependent on offering regular sacrifices to the deities to ensure divine favor or to avoid harsh judgment by God. On high holy days, pilgrims from all over the Near East would come into Jerusalem. The money exchangers provided a vital service just like they do today for foreign travelers. But often folks were cheated in the exchange rate—many of us have had a similar experience when we travel. Raise your hand if you have ever been a victim of exorbitant fees at an international airport cash machine.

However, the larger problem in Jesus' time was not the exchange rate but the religious requirement of sacrificing an unblemished, temple approved goat or sheep or dove or pigeon. The temple had a monopoly. So, can't you just see the sidewalk sign (I can), "The price of a goat this week is 100 shekels." And of course, the sign would be leaving out the really telling part--last week it was only 20 shekels. So, I think you get the picture, widespread corruption, and economic oppression of God's people at the temple—the poorest being impacted the most.

Jesus was royally ticked off and so should we anytime we are witness to such exploitation. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are less charitable than the gospel of John. This is what the synoptic Gospels record Jesus as saying, “My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers.” So, it is clear that Jesus has had it! As mentioned earlier he have tried the softer, gentler, and more diplomatic approach before going ballistic, but we will never know for sure.

Being fully human, Jesus experienced every emotion that we do and that day it was intense anger and a fierce passion for justice and freedom—he decided that all of the merchants—needed to be driven out. Interesting the Greek word used for “driving or casting out” is “ekballo.” It is the very same word that is used in the Gospel of Mark when we learn that Jesus was driven out or “ekballed” out into the desert to be tempted by the devil. It is a spiritually forceful word filled with passion, and desire—and in this specific case, righteous indignation—more about that later.

Over the years I have had mixed reactions to this story. On the one hand, I have felt validated for those times I have felt and expressed anger—especially towards some one or some thing or some system that was doing great harm to myself or others. I will never forget the two years that I engaged in a legal battle against a father who had abused his daughter. My anger and my faith were both gifts that empowered me to advocate for the protection of her mental health and her therapy and not give in or give up. God and I won that one by the way! I am sure you have your own stories about the gift of anger. I would love to hear them.

On the other hand, the way Jesus’ anger is expressed towards the money changers in today’s story is disturbing to me. It is clearly intimidating and threatening and would meet most modern definitions of violence. If you or I walked into a bank, for example, and threw the tables and money around and started snapping a whip we would most certainly be arrested.

So, what exactly are we to learn from this story? How might we make it our story as well? What is our takeaway? Could it be possible that there are times when the ends do justify the means—especially when there is something very important at stake? If in the above example it was shown that the bank had been discriminating against people of color by their lending practices, would you feel any differently about the anger acted out in the bank? The use of force is a huge problem in our society as we debate who gets to carry a weapon, who gets to use a weapon, and whether the use of violence or force is justified if it is the means to arrive at a greater good.

Critical to this exploration is understanding that there are different kinds of anger. Sometimes we are angry simply because we didn't get what we wanted or get our way like a spoiled child. This not the type of anger that Jesus is demonstrating in today's story. It is a passion for the greater good for all. For systems that perpetuate injustice eventually create revolutions—usually violent ones. This kind of discernment between acting upon healthy anger that promotes needed change and the kind that only creates bitterness and hate, often removing the possibility of redemption is very difficult to practically achieve. It is important to remember that, despite all of the temptations to misuse his divine power, Jesus always chose the revolution of love.

In the scriptures there is the notion of righteous indignation. It is so important that we understand it. We mustn't skip over it lightly. It is the type of anger that is connected to God's will to bring equality and fairness into all areas of human life: our intimate relationships, families, workplaces, schools, governmental institutions and in keeping with today's gospel reading: houses of worship. It is an anger that comes from desiring not what is best for only yourself but for the entire community and comes as a gift from God and it is holy.

What does righteous indignation feel like and how can we know what to do with it? It is an anger that is in alignment with the highest purposes of God which is always about justice, mercy, equality, and love. One of

the surest ways we can know this type of anger is from God is that it provides the grace needed to love those we see as our enemies. This is clearly seen in the lives of spiritual greats such as Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Mahatma Gandhi. I wonder if the money changers ever came to know that Jesus' anger came from a place of love. Wouldn't you love to know what happened to them after such an amazing encounter with God?

To summarize a bit, righteous indignation comes from God. We learn about it by not turning a blind eye to the injustices that are before us. We pray deeply. We talk honestly with God. We reflect on scripture, we reason, we seek community discernment. This is all needed in order for accountability and safeguards to be established and maintained. We all need protection from acting out of our own self-centered agendas or letting the reptilian part of our brains take over.

I invite you this Lent to not run from or deny your own anger but seek to understand and deal constructively it and receive righteous indignation as a gift when you encounter it. But before you act on this be sure it comes from a place of centeredness and love. Prayer, ideally, precedes all of our actions so the reptilian brain doesn't take over in moments of intense anger. I offer you this prayer based on Psalm 46:10.

Be still and know that I am God
Be still and know that I am
Be still and know
Be still
Be
Just Be

When we are with God all things are made possible and new. We know from Matthew account of the casting out of the money changers, that the very first thing Jesus did after clearing out the temple was to bring in the blind and the lame so they might be healed. We are told that there was such joy and wonder that the children in the Temple could be heard

singing their Hosannas. What a hope that contains! Let us continue to prepare for Easter by clearing and cleaning the inner temples of our own hearts, until we find ourselves rejoicing, with God, over the New Creation. Amen.