

In Your Face Indignation
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In high school I was on the Speech and Debate team for my last two years, and I happen to love presidential debates. No one wanted to watch them with me in college because I don't tolerate talking. I want to hear every single word and witness every exchange, including how the moderator tries to move things along (or not, as the case may be.) For me, the most striking debate this time around was the second debate, the town hall forum held in New York to focus mostly on domestic issues.

What I found fascinating was the body language of the candidates and their tenacity. At one point, I was afraid it might come to blows and we could see a modern day Caning of Sumner! I looked up what the New York Times had to say the next day, and the analysis went like this, "The vitriol that has been coursing through the campaign for months, in television ads and dueling speeches, played out at exceptionally close range for much of the 90-minute debate. The exchanges were intense and personal, with Mr. Obama and Mr. Romney repeatedly leaving their stools and invading each other's space on the stage . . . At times they were within striking distance of each other as they forcefully made their points." [1] There was a whole lot of anger for the country to see, and it was painfully obvious.

So it's important to speak about the Deadly Sin of Anger this morning as this election will soon reach its conclusion, and there may be a lot of angry people out there if things don't go the way we'd like. Anger isn't always a bad thing. Today is Reformation Sunday, and Martin Luther might have just gone along with all these corrupt practices in the Church if he didn't let his anger over them force his hand. Luther once said, "I never work better than when I am inspired by anger; for when I am angry I can write, pray, and preach well, for then my whole temperature is quickened, my understanding sharpened, and all mundane vexations and temptations depart." [2] Anger can fuel us, inspire us, sharpen us, and help all other distractions to fall away.

This is why some preachers have always thrived on the hellfire and damnation sermons. Even Jesus himself says in Matthew, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." [3] Or think of Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" preached in Connecticut in 1741. Edwards recognized that this was a touchy subject and he said at the end of his sermon, "The use of this awful subject may be for awakening unconverted persons in this congregation. This that you have heard is the case of every one of you that are out of Christ. That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of." [4] I couldn't get through a whole sermon of this theology; it's just not what I believe. But for Jonathan Edwards, these scary, angry images came about because he desperately wanted people in his congregation to come back to God. His intentions were good, but his methods of using fear and anger as a motivation to scare people into submission were perhaps a little questionable.

The thing is, out of the Deadly Sin of Anger, we can live into Righteous Indignation. I think that's exactly what Martin Luther did, and I think that's what Jesus did time and again. When we see Jesus get mad, it's usually over some injustice he's witnessed. In today's passage, he gets mad when people won't openly commit to following him and his teachings. He says that he will acknowledge those who acknowledge him and deny those who deny him before God. This seems really harsh, but he's asking for people to make a choice. Jesus was offering this new way and he felt in line with the Prophetic tradition of Judaism.

The Prophetic Tradition emphasized that God has had it with our selfishness, our cruelty, and our lack of human kindness. God gets mad over injustice and Jesus did too.[5] When you have a deep and abiding love for humanity as much as Jesus did, this love can produce a corresponding amount of anger when you see these people you love with all your heart get abused by other people or by the system itself. When Jesus saw this abuse, he got indignant. Jesus yelled at those in power who took advantage of the poor, he healed in the face of breaking some rules, and he turned over tables in the Temple that represented in his mind and heart all that was wrong with the everyday practice of Judaism advocated by the leadership of the time.

We so desperately want to sand off all the rough edges of Jesus. We want him to only be the little cute baby in Bethlehem or the Good Shepherd or like Mr. Rogers. But Jesus also had a side to him that was fiery and passionate and enraged when he perceived injustice. He was a prophetic figure who got fed up with the way things were and he did something about it. His passion fueled him to speak the truth to power and advocate for changes, and he paid for this righteous indignation with his life in the end.

Now I've spoken about this before, but there really is a difference between anger and righteous indignation. I'll give you a personal example. When I was a kid I played softball, and in fourth grade my team was the best in the league. Interestingly enough, my team was the Red Sox and we only lost one game all season. A little different than how things played out this year, but there you have it.

After yet another victory, I ran to the bench to get my water bottle before lining up to shake hands with the other team. It was a hot summer day and my water bottle had been sweating, so my hands were wet. I was the last one in line, shook all the other girls' hands and then all of a sudden got grabbed by their coach. She held me by my upper arm as she got in my face and accused me of spitting on my hand. I tried to point out that my hand was wet from my water bottle, but she wouldn't believe me. She accused me of spitting on my hand and being a bad sport.

And then Momma Lorincz comes onto the field, goes right up to the coach, gets in her face, and tells her with this rage in her voice that I had never heard before or since, "Don't touch my daughter." So I was between my Momma Bear and this crazy coach—my arm was hurting, my mom was terrifying, so I just began to cry, naturally. The conversation got heated, my coach came over to intervene and said I was one of the best sports on the team, that I come from a good family—my father's a principal and my mother here is a teacher, we go to church every Sunday, relax, she didn't spit on her hand. The coach released me, my mom didn't punch her in the face, I pulled myself together, and learned the valuable lesson of not drinking water until after I shake hands with the opposing team.

Today I would argue that both my mom and the other coach were displaying righteous indignation here. The word indignation itself comes from the Latin word indignitas, which is the opposite of dignity; indignity gets aroused when dignity is denied to others.[6] The coach thought that I had spit on my hand to rub it in that her team had lost. Had I done that, it would be okay for her to be indignant about that. Not okay for her to grab me and get in my face about it, especially since I was in fourth grade and she was a grown woman. But she would have been justified in her righteous indignation had I intentionally belittled her team in that way.

My mother was indignant because I was being forcefully handled by some random woman and accused of being a poor sport when it just wasn't true. The Momma Bear came out and she was terrifying in her rage. Yet, I maintain (and when you see her again, you better too or else)

that she was justified in her righteous indignation. I was innocent, and my mom came to my defense to back me up when I needed help.

Here's the thing, there are times in life when having passionate, in your face, righteous indignation when you see someone's dignity threatened is a good, healthy thing. Robin Meyers finishes speaking about the Deadly Sin of Anger and the Lively Virtue of Righteous Indignation by pointing out a couple of key historical points that lift up how important indignation over injustice can be. Meyers lays out that there would have been no end to slavery without war, no Civil Rights without Bloody Sunday, no progress toward inclusiveness in the church without bitter struggle and charged rhetoric, and he maintains that no hope exists for the environment until angry people realize that we all live downstream.[7]

There are times in our past, in our present, and in our future when it's a good thing to have so much love for someone or something, that you have some corresponding indignation when that someone or something is threatened or belittled or ignored or abused. The question is who or what means the most to you and how will you defend them if the time comes? Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Jim Rutenberg and Jeff Zeleny, "Rivals Bring Bare Fists to Rematch," in The New York Times, October 16, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/17/us/politics/obama-and-romney-turn-up-the-temperature-at-their-second-debate.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

[2] Martin Luther, as quoted by William Willimon in Acting Up in Jesus' Name.

[3] Matthew 10:34.

[4] Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," July 8, 1741, as found in the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/sermons.sinners.html>

[5] Robin Meyers, The Virtue in the Vice: Finding Seven Lively Virtues in the Seven Deadly Sins, 67.

[6] Robin Meyers, The Virtue in the Vice: Finding Seven Lively Virtues in the Seven Deadly Sins, 71.

[7] Robin Meyers, The Virtue in the Vice: Finding Seven Lively Virtues in the Seven Deadly Sins, 80.