

Righteous Anger
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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15:00

I've been able to see my sister in action a few times in court, and saw two full trials—one was a drunk driving case and the other a domestic violence assault case. But during one of these trials, she got so mad at a defense attorney that I thought she would get into trouble. At the very end of the trial, the defense attorney, who was notoriously unorganized and frequently gave my sister headaches in other respects, asked for a recess and then came back saying that he had new evidence to submit, important evidence that his client hadn't told him about until just now.

My sister immediately objected and the jury was dismissed so they could hash this out with the judge, but I got to stay and watch the show. Maureen went on a bit of a tirade, calling the defense attorney incompetent and unorganized, and saying that he was clearly violating the rules of discovery. "How convenient that this new evidence appears now!" she said. And Maureen claimed that if she would do this as a prosecuting attorney, it would have been prosecutorial misconduct and have caused a mistrial. However, he was a public defender and was able to get away with these kinds of shenanigans.

The judge ended up allowing the evidence to be submitted though he did reprimand the public defender a bit for not having his act together. My sister was given a few minutes to examine this photograph, that's what the evidence was, and talk to her main witness about it. The jury came back into the courtroom and when it was her turn to question the defendant and examine this evidence, she ripped them both to shreds. At the end of the day, she won the trial convincingly, shook hands with the defense attorney, and we left the courthouse victorious.

But as we were leaving, I told her that I was happy that she won but that I felt sorry for the defense attorney. She looked at me, still with that fire in her eyes I grew up with when we were kids, and she asked how I could possibly feel sorry for him. I told her, "Maureen, you went on a rampage, and he looked like he was about to cry. I just feel bad for the guy—that must have been embarrassing and you calling him incompetent was pretty mean."

She agreed with me on that front, but then went on to say that she was so mad because what he did wasn't okay. You have to submit your evidence well in advance for the opposing side to study, and while he didn't perhaps do this on purpose, he put her at a real disadvantage. He wasn't playing by the rules, and that wasn't right.

What my sister displayed that day in court, I've come to believe, was righteous anger. What irked her and caused her to object was that this move was unjust and wrong from a legal perspective. She was mad, and probably within her right to be so. For me, it brought the lesson home that there are times when righteous indignation, when righteous anger over injustice is necessary, and maybe even a good thing.

We can see this today with Jesus causing a scene in the Temple. He thought that this Temple sacrificial system was unjust and exploiting the poor, so he wanted to send a message. The animals that were present for sacrifice had to be unblemished and pure, and foreign currencies had to be exchanged for the official half-shekel of the Temple tax.[1] Jesus didn't like some of these practices, so he drove the sheep and the cattle away. He poured out all the money that the moneychangers had collected from this enterprise. Jesus then overturns the tables on which they would conduct their business, and he tells the people who were selling doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"[2]

In the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this episode takes place at the end of Jesus' ministry. Many scholars think that this was the event that sealed Jesus' fate and that's probably the most historically accurate representation of what happened. Jesus had this dramatic upheaval of the Temple sacrificial system right around Passover, when Jews, including himself and his disciples, would travel from all over the countryside to Jerusalem to observe this holy time.

Passover was a week-long festival in the spring, where people celebrated the exodus from Egypt and the harvest of barley. It was a celebration that expressed the themes of liberation from oppression and divine salvation.[3] People would gather in Jerusalem, and the city would have been bustling with activity. There would have probably been extra Roman soldiers on hand to keep the peace. If there's one thing the Romans hated more than anything, it was rabble rousers who disturbed the peace. And this festival that celebrated themes of liberation from oppression would have also made the Roman soldiers a bit on their guard since they were foreigners occupying this country after all.

So here comes Jesus in this charged atmosphere, going into the Temple complex and causing a scene—overturning tables, releasing sacrificial animals, yelling at those in power— "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"[4] It's no wonder that this was the event that sealed his fate, because this dramatic display of disapproval made the Romans and Jewish leadership of the time realize just how troublesome this Jesus of Nazareth really was.

The author of the Gospel of John uses this episode to set the tone for the remaining Gospel, it happens in Chapter 2, to put us all on alert for the signs to come. In John, this is really his big inaugural public appearance and happens right after the wedding in Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine. It also foreshadows the destruction and punishment of the elite of society's center of power, Jerusalem itself. The Romans will sack the city in 70 C.E. and will destroy the Temple that had taken so many years to build.[5] Overturning the tables is meant to make us sit up and take notice—we are going to see some pretty amazing things in the pages to come.

But I think Jesus' actions bring up a larger question of the merits of righteous anger. Aristotle once said, "Anybody can become angry—that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way—that is not within everybody's power and is not easy."[6] I googled "the merits of anger" when I was thinking about this sermon, and most of the results that popped up were about anger management—anger management for teens, the advantages of anger management treatment, etc. I think that most of us can agree that being angry all the time isn't a good thing for our health, and that people probably won't want to be around us too much if we're just mad at the world and everyone around us 24/7.

But there are traditions of righteous anger that Jesus was drawing upon when he made his public display of indignation in the Temple. If we keep in mind that Jesus was rooted in the prophetic tradition, we can see some similarities with other prophetic figures. Moses got so mad at the Golden Calf mishap that he smashed the tablets on the ground and had to go back up the mountain to receive them again.[7] John the Baptist used to call people "broods of vipers"—vipers are venomous snakes that eat each other sometimes, not exactly a nice sentiment to express.[8]

And the prophet Jeremiah was sent by God to announce that God was no longer proud of the people, so Jeremiah dramatically bought a new pair of undergarments, wore them every day without washing them, and buried them in the wet sand by a river. He then dug them up a little bit later, put them back on, and "shouted that this is what has happened to the people who were God's pride." [9] That story is disgusting, but it shows the actions these prophets would

take and phrases they would say to call out the people when they were misbehaving. Prophets would get mad when they saw injustice in the world, and they weren't afraid to do something to bring the message home.

We do a real disservice to Jesus' actions in the Temple that day if we don't put him in line with this prophetic tradition. He wasn't just going in and having a hissy fit, telling people that he didn't like what he was seeing. After all, Jesus probably traveled to Jerusalem with his disciples every year for Passover. This event, if we are to believe the Synoptic Gospels, happened at the end of his third year of ministry. I think that this display of righteous anger was purposeful and deliberate, dramatic and a little over the top, possibly, but Jesus knew what he was doing.

Frankly, Jesus was in line with Aristotle's definition of appropriate anger. Jesus was angry with the right people and to the right degree, he was angry at the right time and for the right purpose and in the right way. He needed to send a message and he did—he paid with his life to show us the ways of compassion and justice, that exploiting people wasn't okay and that we are called to question and do something about unjust societal practices.

This is the example he left as a legacy. And in the words of one of my favorite theologians Dorothee Soelle, Jesus, "continues to transform the consciousness of those people who believe his promises. With his coming and through his work this world's hope has grown, and thus there is increasing room for courage. In his name the face of the earth itself has been changed." [10] And thanks be to God for that. Amen.

[1] The Jewish Annotated New Testament, 161.

[2] John 2:16

[3] The Jewish Annotated New Testament, 161.

[4] John 2:16

[5] Warren Carter, "Constructions of Violence and Identities in Matthew's Gospel," in *Violence in the New Testament*, 99.

[6] <http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2192.Aristotle>

[7] Exodus 32:19

[8] Luke 3:7

[9] Quinn Caldwell and Curtis Preston, *The Unofficial Handbook of the United Church of Christ*, 147.

[10] Dorothee Soelle, *Creative Disobedience*, 4.