

Righteous Indignation

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“Righteous Indignation” Pilgrim Church UCC, February 12, 2017, (Matthew 5:21-37) Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Occasionally we would have career fairs at Wadsworth High School and people representing all sorts of fields would come. Remember God called me to ministry in sixth grade. No one in my family had ever been a minister, though many family members have served in the military—so I contemplated being a military chaplain. Wanting more information about chaplaincy, I asked a Navy recruiter at the career fair who condescendingly said that women in the Navy are only good as nurses. All the guys within earshot laughed at my expense. It was so embarrassing. Though to clarify, there’s nothing wrong with nursing, one of my grandmothers was a registered nurse. But the way this Navy Recruiter spoke and not deigning to even provide information about military chaplaincy angered me. When I shared this experience with my grandfather (First Sergeant in the United States Army) he first asked for that guy’s name to show up to his office with a rifle and his VFW buddies. Then grandpa encouraged me to write the Navy and tell them what happened. Don’t just stew in your anger—do something so this doesn’t happen to other young women. Grandpa got me the names and addresses of some people in the Navy and my little letter writing campaign commenced.

Shockingly several representatives of the United States Navy wrote back. Here’s what one letter said: “Dear Miss Lorincz, Thank you for your letter regarding your negative experience with a Navy representative during a public school career fair. It is heartening to see the youth of America, our future leaders, voice their concerns and articulate their feelings, emotions, and stance. I deeply regret the inaccuracy of the information you received. Your desire to become a minister is a wonderful aspiration, and your consideration of becoming a military Chaplain provides me with an opportunity to set the record straight regarding the role of women in our Navy. Those of us serving in the Navy today pride ourselves on equal opportunity and our Core Values of Honor, Courage and Commitment.” The letter goes on from there and is signed “Sincerely, Jay L. Johnson, Admiral, U.S. Navy.” This letter was written by (at that time) the Chief of Naval Operations who even led the Joint Chiefs of Staff. All these years later, I still have Admiral Johnson’s letter. While military chaplaincy is clearly not where God was calling—it’s a reminder that when we experience injustice (in this case blatant sexism) we can’t sit idly by. As I said, my grandpa told me who to write and not understanding military ranks—I didn’t even know that I was writing the most senior naval officer in our country (the Chief of Naval Operations.) And he wrote me back! My letter was both feisty and respectful.

Sometimes we can turn our anger into something useful and positive—righteous indignation. This is what Jesus’ teachings are alluding to in Matthew’s Gospel. Now there are some scripture passages that can make us uncomfortable and Jesus’ teachings this morning may rub us the wrong way. A beloved Hebrew Bible professor once told us in Seminary that it’s better to face these things head on and even disagree than deny that troublesome passages exist in the Bible in the first place. Today we hear Jesus teach: “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” “And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.” “But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”[1]

For historical context, we know that this was a patriarchal society. And it's true that Jesus had a special place in his heart for women. He wasn't the only rabbi at the time who did, but the role of women in Jesus' ministry (particularly in Luke's Gospel) is significant. At this time, a man could divorce a woman for various reasons—particularly if the marriage hadn't produced a child (which was always blamed on her.) Having these seemingly harsh teachings about adultery and divorce could in fact be interpreted as Jesus protecting vulnerable women. Jesus is teaching his followers about right relationships and that how we treat one another matters.

In particular, Jesus is speaking about anger at various places in our text. Now anger isn't always a bad thing. Anger used in healthy ways can fuel us and inspire us. That's where anger turns into righteous indignation. We see something that's wrong, and we do something about it to right that wrong. That Navy Recruiter treating me with such disrespect made me angry. Given military discipline, my grandpa firmly believed that his Commanding Officer found out what he had done through my little letter writing campaign and that perhaps the Navy would find someone else to interact with public high school students at career fairs. At minimum people would talk to that guy about sexism in the military. Not cool! Anger (directed by my grandpa) ultimately fueled me for good.

Here's the thing—for good or bad, the effectiveness of anger is why some preachers thrive on hellfire sermons. Even Jesus himself says later on 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."^[2] Or think of Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" preached to his congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts and again in Enfield, Connecticut in 1741. Edwards recognized that this was a touchy subject and 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."^[3] For Jonathan Edwards, these scary images came about because he desperately wanted people in his congregation to come back to God. His intentions were probably good, but his methods of using fear and anger as a motivation to scare people into submission were perhaps a little questionable. Though don't we know preachers who still use these methods of fear today?

Years ago we explored a sermon series on the Seven Deadly Sins. And maybe you recall that out of the deadly sin of anger we can live into the lively virtue of righteous indignation. That's what Jesus did time and again, and it's what we see this morning. When we see Jesus get mad in the Gospels, it's usually over some injustice he's just witnessed. In today's passage, he gets mad when he contemplates people treating each other with disrespect. People are angry with one another and insulting each other, calling one another names. Jesus is telling his followers that if you want to truly worship God you need to be reconciled with your neighbors. And don't be lusting after women all the time and divorce your wife for unjust reasons. Be a person of your word. Let your yes be yes or your no be no. Don't be duplicitous and shady. Jesus is offering good ethics about right relationships, and he's 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. When you have a deep and abiding love for humanity as much as Jesus did, this love can produce a corresponding amount of righteous indignation when you see people you love with all your heart get abused by other people or by a corrupt 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 of Nazareth. 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. Jesus didn't like seeing people not having right relationships with one another, especially his followers who he expected to be paying attention to what he was teaching. Jesus' passion fueled him to speak truth to power and advocate for changes, and he paid for this righteous indignation with his life in the end.

Remember that the word indignation comes from the Latin word indignitas, which is the opposite of dignity; indignity gets aroused when dignity is denied to others.[4] There are times in life when having passionate, in your face, righteous indignation when you see someone's dignity threatened is a good thing. UCC Minister Robin Meyers writes about the deadly sin of anger and the lively virtue of righteous indignation by pointing out a couple of key historical events 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 that no hope exists for the environment until angry people realize that we all live downstream.
[5]

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 righteous 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] Matthew 5:28, NRSV; Matthew 5:30; Matthew 5:32.

[2] Matthew 10:34.

[3] 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>

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

[5] Robin Meyers, *The Virtue in the Vice*, 80.