

Indifference vs. Justified Anger

The portrait of Jesus in today's Gospel is a world away from the storybook, caricature of Jesus – a meek and mild, milk-toast figure, often with blue eyes and blondish hair (and even, sometimes -- an Irish brogue!). In today's Gospel, Jesus is angry, aggressive ... pissed-off, to put it bluntly.

Jesus loves the poor and powerless, the downtrodden. He puts himself entirely at their service. But he does not stop there. Jesus calls for justice and denounces the injustices of poverty and oppression. But he does not stop there either. Jesus engages in dramatic action for justice. Jesus progresses from doing good works of charity, to speaking out for justice, to taking risks through direct public action against injustice.

Gandhi called Jesus “the most active, nonviolent resistor known to history”! Powerful words! Like Gandhi marching to the sea to make salt; or Dr. King walking illegally through Birmingham's downtown park to protest segregation; Jesus in today's Gospel disrupts 'business as usual' in the Temple – the center of Jewish life. Jesus practices nonviolent civil disobedience by driving-out those who bought and sold, by turning over tables of money changers and seats of the dove sellers, and refusing to permit anyone to carry anything into the Temple and by calling for prayer rather than commerce. Jesus decries those who turn God's house into a shopping mall. Risking his life, he cries out: “You have made it a den of robbers!” While in today's Gospel of John, the incident happened toward the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, in the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – it occurs at the end of his ministry as he arrives in Jerusalem; and this outburst ultimately leads to his arrest, jailing, trial, torture and execution.

Sisters and brothers, why does Jesus risk everything in this Temple incident? He risks everything because the Temple System had become complicit with the Roman emperor's economic oppression of the people. It epitomizes religious-based, institutional injustice. It robs the poor in God's name ... those who are taught by the religious authorities that God dwells *only* in the Temple and that, pilgrimages and large financial contributions are required for legitimate worship.

The Temple was an expensive, religious Disneyland! Each year at the time of Passover, the population of Jerusalem quadrupled, 18,000 lambs were slaughtered in the Temple, and the faithful were required to pay a hefty Temple Tax. The poor – especially women, the ill

and the outcasts – had to purchase expensive doves so that they could be “purified” and “made worthy” to worship ... though only on the fringes of the Temple!

And: Jesus’ action of confronting the unjust Temple-structure head on is *perfectly nonviolent*: he does not hurt anyone; he does not take a whip against anyone.

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Sisters and brothers, as we gather on this 3rd Sunday of our Lenten spring-cleaning of our hearts, we might reflect on the issue of anger – Jesus *was angry*, appropriately *angry*, and he put his anger into action to confront evil and bring about systemic change.

What makes us angry? What might we get angry over? We might get angry over getting stalled in traffic on the way home from work..., but what else might get us angry?

Pope Francis, in his almost 5 years as Pope, over and over again points out that *indifference* to the suffering and oppression and brokenness and injustice experienced by others, is the major block to bringing about systemic change and in joining with others in bringing about the world God intended. On July 8, 2013, Francis made his first voyage outside of Rome, to the small seaport of Salena on the island of Lampedusa – a seashore where thousands of refugees had died in boats attempting to reach safety from Africa and the Middle East.

Francis’ face was grave talking under a harsh sun; facing the crowd he stated:

“Unbridled capitalism is like Herod who sowed death to defend his own well-being, his own soap bubble. And so it continues: Let us ask the Lord to remove the part of Herod that lurks in our own hearts; Let us ask the Lord for the grace to weep over our indifference, to weep over the cruelty of our world, of our own hearts and of all those who make social and economic decisions which open the doors to tragic situations like this.”

“Has anyone wept?” is the question the Pope repeated, while talking about *“those thousands dead whose tomb is now in the depths of the sea. Today has anyone wept for our world? God will judge us based on how we treated the migrants.”*

The Pope goes on to say:

“We live in a culture of comfort which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, makes us live in soap bubbles which, however lovely, are insubstantial; they offer a fleeting and empty illusion which results in indifference to others; indeed it even needs to the globalization of indifference. In this globalized world we have become used to the suffering of others; it doesn’t affect me, it doesn’t concern me, it’s none of my business....”

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Sisters and brothers, as we continue our journey of Lent, we might think of ‘Lent anger.’ I don’t know if you’ve ever looked at it this way before, but Lent is the Church’s official time to get angry enough to overturn old tables and set-up new ones.

And – in the midst of the massive suffering and injustice in our world – there are some hopeful signs:

Our Parish – with numbers of other Congregations locally and around the country – declaring ourselves to be a Sanctuary Parish... publicly proclaiming our willingness to disobey the law when it is unjust and oppressive and to work to *over-turn* it.

The high school students in Parkland, Florida – and now, around the country – have stopped business as usual – turned over the old tables, not as Democrats or Republicans, left or right, but simply as a group of hurt and broken children who have had enough and are calling our Nation to sanity: to *stop* worshiping the idol of the Second Amendment and guns as a god, that over and over demands the sacrifice of children. We have a long way to go – but in many ways our high school students around the Nation, have done more in two weeks than our Congress has done in 20 years to wake us up to the insanity of gun violence in our nation! On March 24 – which is Palm Sunday weekend – much like, on that first Palm Sunday Jesus walked in procession with the poor and powerless, the women and children into Jerusalem to challenge the status quo and to turn the tables over; our high school youngsters will March on Washington and in Syracuse and in cities around the Nation. I would invite us all to prayerfully consider joining in this procession – to put our justified anger into action as we pray that this might be a new moment in America.

As we continue to reflect as a Parish during Lent on the evil – the sin – of racism, I'd like to conclude with an example of constructive aggression and anger that can be seen in the campaign against slavery in the United States:

One of the prominent leaders of the Movement was William Lloyd Garrison. In writing on the subject of slavery he said:

“On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak or write with moderation. No, No! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a ‘moderate’ alarm; tell the mother to ‘gradually’ extricate her babe from the fire; but urged me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest and I will not equivocate. I will not excuse. I will not retreat a single inch. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal!”

On that spring morning in Jerusalem, if there had been statues in the Temple they probably would have leapt off their pedestals!

Amen!