

Religious Zeal

John 2:13-22

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What gets you really worked up? People that swerve all over the road while talking on their cell phones? People who don't return emails or text messages? School boards that don't consult with parents before changing their plans?

How about on a larger scale? Is there a social issue that gets you worked up? Maybe smooth-talking politicians that use spin to justify almost anything? Perhaps judgmental Christians that use the Bible like some sort of weapon? I'll admit it, that gets me going!

A while ago I read a book called *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman. Goleman made the point that anger tends to build on anger. Put one irritant on top of another, toss in some tiredness and stress, and you've got a sure recipe for a short fuse. Throw in a last straw—a co-worker missing an assignment, a kid breaking a jar of jelly at the grocery store—and you might just reach the breaking point.

What then? Goleman says that the well-worn advice of getting something off your chest by shaking your fists in anger or raising your voice doesn't necessarily help. In fact, it often makes things worse. Better to have a *cooling off period*, says Goleman: take a walk, watch a little TV, talk to a friend, say a prayer. After you've cooled off, then it's helpful to express your anger *directly* and *constructively* to the person at which you're angry. In the best-case scenario, you might feel some relief from it, and your anger might even lead to righting a wrong or getting that person to change their behavior.

So, let's test this theory in view of today's gospel reading. Jesus is all worked up, even angry. His teeth are clenched and his eyes are burning fire. It's hard to tell what exactly has set him off. We know he's in Jerusalem for Passover. As an observant Jew, he's going to the Temple for sacrifice and prayer. As he enters the outer Court of the Gentiles, he comes upon a vast marketplace. Merchants are selling cattle, sheep, and doves to pilgrims who need to offer a sacrifice. Moneychangers are exchanging Roman coins for Jewish shekels so people can properly pay the temple tax.

Seeing all this commotion, Jesus—there's no delicate what to put this—blows his stack. He improvises a whip and drives the animals out of the Temple. He overturns the tables of the moneychangers and flings their coins into the air. Finally he shouts: "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

The disciples are at a complete loss for words. I can imagine them ducking for cover along with many of the bystanders. Only later will they try to explain Jesus' actions by recalling a verse from Ps 69: "Lord, zeal for your house will consume me."

Again, we don't really know what the problem is. I'm pretty sure Jesus doesn't lose his cool because of a bad night's sleep. Nor is this a story meant to discourage youth bake sales in the narthex. No, there's way more going on than that. Jesus' anger could stem from the fact that, in the middle of all the commotion, people are losing track of why they're in the Temple in the first place—to worship the Creator of heaven and earth. It could be that the merchants and moneychangers are cheating people by charging exorbitant sums of money. It could be that Jesus is taking Judaism to task for putting so many rules in front of ordinary folks that it's almost impossible to find their way to God. It could be all of these things and more. The common denominator seems to be this: *Jesus has an intense dislike for things that drive people away from God, rather than draw people closer to God.*

And so, in the middle of Passover, surrounded by throngs of pilgrims, Jesus' zeal for his Father's house consumes every fiber of his being. And he starts rearranging the furniture in the courtyard. This is certainly not the Jesus we learned about in Sunday School, is it?

What do you think—were Jesus' actions justified? I grew up in a Norwegian household. "Making a scene in public" was close to the unforgivable sin, I have a hard time relating to this side of Jesus. Daniel Goleman would have approved that Jesus' anger was directed at the appropriate target, and he was trying to right a wrong. But Goleman probably would have suggested a cooling off period. "Count to 10, Rabbi. Say a prayer. Settle down!"

I'm going to give Jesus the benefit of the doubt here. He *is* Jesus, after all. Sometimes a display of anger can be a helpful thing—to get an important issue off one's chest and out in the open. And let's not forget, Jesus was human. He cared deeply about certain things and was bound to get worked up over them.

Still, religious anger can be tricky business. It's hard to know how much is too much. What religious zealot doesn't feel that his or her actions are thoroughly justified?

Take the case of Pastor Fred Phelps. A few years ago, Phelps sent a group from his church in Topeka, Kansas to picket the funeral of Andrew Kemple of Anoka. Kemple was a soldier. He died honorably while serving our country in Iraq. But the Kansas contingent came to speak a word of judgment. "Soldiers like Kemple are dying," they claimed, "because God hates the United States. And God hates the United States because we tolerate homosexuality."

I'm sure Phelps and company thought they were doing much the same that Jesus was doing at the temple—standing up for the truth. But were they? Religious devotion can be a good thing. But taken too far, it can be terribly destructive, especially when it presumes to set forth God's last word on a subject.

In my opinion, Pastor Fred Phelps gives religion a bad name. His version of Christianity is less about *following* Jesus and more about *using* Jesus as an excuse to lash out at policies and people he doesn't like. And it often causes unspeakable harm.

Friends, we need to be careful with our religious anger, or as my Norwegian father used to call it, our *righteous indignation*. We live in a day and age with far too much righteous indignation, I think. Whether it's a battle over in vitro fertilization in Alabama or a struggle over what's happening at the border in Texas, people resort to name-calling and court cases. Suddenly it's not simply about weighing in on an issue, but rather about winning at all costs. It ends up building walls instead of bridges, and just as often as not, it ends up driving people away from God.

So...does the story of the temple cleansing have anything to say to us today? I think so. It says that as followers of Jesus, we can and should feel passionate about things. Jesus did. It's okay to get worked up, even angry, over the troublesome issues we are facing.

Still, I think we need to practice self-control. And since we are *not* Jesus, we need to take our stands with humility. After all, the Bible is a big, complicated book. We can make it say almost anything we want to. And in the process, our religious zeal itself can become part of the problem.

Friends, as we struggle with challenging issues, let me say that I'm proud to be part of a denomination with a moderate voice. We ELCA Lutherans get accused of being middle-of-the road and "soft" on scripture. To that I say *Amen!* We need to read the Bible carefully and in context, rather than simply picketing the funerals of those with whom we disagree.

No doubt, the ELCA has people that feel strongly on many sides of an issue, but a lot of us are in the middle. And often that's an okay place to be. Hopefully it helps us listen more and shout less. Hopefully it reminds us that we have any number of issues we're facing—books in public schools, racism, gender identity, immigration, and yes, in vitro fertilization—that we're not going to be able to solve in our lifetime.

As I see it, compromise—even for those with religious zeal—doesn't have to be a dirty word. Sure, we're going to have times when we get worked up about things. And sometimes our response will come from our religious convictions. When it does, like Jesus, we need to be willing to stand up and be counted. We need to be willing to try to right a wrong or change a behavior. And yet, unlike Jesus, it's probably best for us to express our anger only after we've cooled off a little. And it's always wise to express our anger directly and appropriately to toward the target of our anger.

What's the point of all this? The same as it was for Jesus. To get important issues out in the open. Hopefully, to build bridges, not walls. And—in the process—to draw any and all people closer to God. Amen.