

“Anger Management”

(1 Kings 8: 1, 6, 22-30, 41-43; Ephesians 6: 10-20; Psalm 84; John 6: 56-69)

For the past month, our gospel lessons have all been from John Chapter Six, and they have all had something to do with food, more specifically with *bread*—whether the familiar daily kind or the uniquely miraculous kind, or the mysterious *sacramental* kind. What’s vitally important here is the sequence and the lesson that goes with it. Let me go back over that sequence for a moment, because today we come to the part of the story where the rubber meets the road, where *decisions* are being made in *response* to that lesson, and we need to be absolutely clear about this because we too may be called upon to make our own decision, perhaps here today.

The chapter begins with a story about the miraculous feeding of thousands of people who had been following Jesus. They have been so hungry to hear what he has to teach that they have lost sight of mundane details, like the hour of the day or how far they might be from their homes. Completely without fanfare and without pulling any attention toward himself, Jesus begins to pass around what some kid in the crowd was willing to share. Before they know it, everyone has had plenty to eat.

That crowd, of course, was predominantly Jewish, and these folks had a powerful sense of who their ancestors were and what their common *story* had been, from the very first right up to the present. They know the story about *manna* in the wilderness, that God sent to keep his people alive and to keep them alert to the divine presence in their midst. This crowd can see the connection between the *manna* and what Jesus has just done in their midst. No problem there. And when Jesus tightens that connection a little, saying that *he is* the bread that nourishes their inner spirit and feeds the kind of *eternal* life that God intended for them, I don’t think the average folks in the crowd had a problem with that either. What they heard in Jesus, what they saw him do, how they felt his change working *within* them, well, it all fit together.

Where the problems begin in the sequence, it has to do with unwarrantedly *foolish interpretations* of what Jesus said—which is what the Pharisees (and their modern cousins) always leap to. The Pharisees accuse him of promoting some kind of cannibalism, which couldn’t possibly be *kosher*, so how awful is that! Personally, I’m a little surprised Jesus dignified that argument with a response, but he did. He emphasized that the connection between daily bread and miraculous heaven-sent bread is *symbolic* and *sacramental*, that it requires being able to see spiritual realities breaking into daily experience, and that all of this is being demonstrated *in him*—in his ministry, his teaching, his healing and *saving* presence.

What happens next is a bit of a sucker-punch for Jesus and for the reader too. Now his own disciples and committed followers begin to react to what he has just been teaching and apparently the *majority* of them have a terminal objection. Somehow, though it’s not explained exactly, this is a straw that breaks a camel’s back. It’s a “*hard teaching*” they claim. In any event, the majority of his followers walk away. I happen to think it’s because they can see theological implications of this teaching will eventually get Jesus in big trouble *and* anyone who’s standing with him at the time, so it’s really an

issue of *courage*, which was the subject of another story in John Chapter 6, that story about the disciples, a boat and a storm.

So, Jesus has laid out a cornerstone teaching about himself and his ministry, and the majority of his followers have left. *My* question—and this is our *interactive* segment today—is how do you think Jesus *felt* about that? Picture his face, if you can. What does it show?

Is there possibly some anger showing on his face? I believe there is, *but* if you were raised on hymns like, “Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild”, in which the demeanor of Jesus is always the emotional equivalent of the colour *beige*, and his beatific smile is always intact and his voice never rises above conversational tones, then you may be missing about two thirds of the details in the gospel stories. Jesus in the gospels *could* get angry, and *often* did. There are lessons to learn from *that*, as well as from his teaching.

I recall about a dozen years ago, I was leading an Anger Management course in which about half the group were clearly not from a church background. I explained at the outset that although I was a minister, I didn’t plan to use much religious material in the course, but I did suggest in passing that there’s a lot to *learn* about anger from the example of *Jesus*. I was amazed by the response I got. Some in that non-church group were *offended*, as if I had uttered blasphemy. Jesus was “*incapable* of anger,” they countered, and *he* didn’t have a *problem* with anger. I replied that the reason he didn’t have a *problem* with anger was because he could let it loose when it was called for, as *often* as it was called for, and that *he* could let it loose *face-to-face* rather than *from behind* someone’s back, or else *through the courts*.

Back to our text and *your* question, this Jesus you’re visualizing as the majority of his disciples are walking away, has he still got that pasted-on grin? Is he perhaps softly saddened? Or is he possibly rolling up his sleeves? The text, of course, gives no hint to this effect, which is why *I* think it’s fair game for some free imagining. But if you look elsewhere in the gospel stories to see what kinds of things Jesus did get angry about, you may find some helpful clues.

In the rough and tumble of daily encounters with his critics and detractors, with his disciples and wannabe’s, with politicians, civil servants and not-so-civil servants, Jesus could freely trade insults with the holy rollers, he could pop fat egos and hammer the hypocrites, he could straighten out twisted disciples, he could call injustice by its proper name, and the *perpetrators* of injustice he could call by their proper *epithets*. There are a *lot* of those activities going on in the gospels. Sometimes, like when Jesus goes to work cleaning out the temple, it’s impossible to miss, and I note that in the hymn *Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild* there is not a verse about that temple episode, even though all four gospels tell the story and John, in his gospel, gets it right *up front* in the order, near the very beginning of his ministry, so that this story is actually programmatic for all that follows.

I think the main reason why we miss so much of the anger of Jesus, has to do with the King James tradition and two words in particular that *still* surface in so many of the newer translations. The

one word is “indignant” and the other is “rebuke”. Let me ask you, do either of those sound particularly *angry*, or threatening or even unpleasant? In the gospels, Jesus is often *indignant* in response to behaviours or attitudes that are clearly unfair or bigoted, most especially on the part of the disciples when they’re trying to keep people or *children away* from Jesus. Well, what does that really mean? To be *in-dignant* means to lose your normally dignified composure, to lose your cool, to *appear undignified* perhaps. To be “mildly” or “politely” indignant is an oxymoron. No, there’s anger in there and it may well be fiery. It has to do with assumptions and attitudes that result in rudeness and injustice for *others*, and Jesus will not stand quietly by, sweetly smiling, while that stuff is going on.

There’s also a lot of *rebuking* in the gospel stories, often between Jesus and his disciples. And if that sounds a little mild or tame, or if it sounds like some proper Elizabethan virtue, let’s paraphrase it into the 21st century. A rebuke is “in-your-face” anger. It’s a face-to-face dressing down that aims to identify and expose some dangerous assumption or misconception, to turn it around and put it in its proper place. A classic example in the gospel comes when Jesus has announced that he’s heading for Jerusalem for the final time, and Simon Peter (the *disciple*) rebukes Jesus (the *Teacher*) telling him that’s a dumb idea and they’re not going to let it happen. Jesus then rebukes Simon Peter, in spades, gives him a new nickname (“Satan”) to replace his previous one, and tells him to get around behind, right to the back of the class.

Especially in *that* story, you can see another target for the timely and helpful anger of Jesus. If he sometimes seems a little harsh on his own followers, it could be that he has a real thing about people who should know better and who *did* know better at least once, but then slid back down the slope, lost sight of the lesson, *had* faith but then let it slip through the cracks. Does that sound plausible? And doesn’t that also sound a lot like Saint Paul when he’s writing to churches that he founded and set on the right track, who then wandered a little, or a lot, and he had to draw it to their attention? And do you suppose Paul was always smiling sweetly as he wrote, using only properly polite and polished prose, or did he occasionally resort to some good old Greek *gutter-talk* to express his in-your-face kind of anger?

Anger itself is not a problem. And I’ll tell you, that’s real good news for churches because we usually have more than enough at any given moment. Anger is not necessarily a problem. It can even be a *good* thing, a timely and *helpful* thing when we’re confronted by injustice, when we’re taking the side of those who are pushed out to the margins, when we’re trying to talk common sense to the deaf, blind and bored.

Anger is not the *opposite* of love any more than doubt is the opposite of faith. In both cases, *indifference* and *apathy* are the real enemies. *Not* caring, *not* feeling deeply, *not* cherishing what is precious, *not* thinking about what really matters, *that’s* the problem, and sometimes the appropriate target of holy anger. In the gospels, when Jesus gets a sense that people have lost what they once cherished, that they have grown cold where they used to burn bright, that they no longer care about the

ideals they once held closest, there's a *problem*, and there is going to be a *response*. And I think it's vitally important for us to have a sense of how Jesus might feel about that. If we have let our faith sort of *morph* into a habit, if justice issues that mattered deeply to Jesus are no longer even on our radar, if learning to be a disciple seems to be getting harder and harder, then we should be very aware of how that may play out and what the response might entail. And if the goal is to remain in the good joyful fellowship of Jesus, at table in his kingdom, at his own banquet, then we don't really want to walk away from the winning side, do we?

There's a great story about Bishop Desmond Tutu in his younger days in South Africa. When the South African government canceled a political rally against apartheid on the day before the rally was to happen, Tutu moved the rally to St. George's Cathedral and he began the event with a worship service. The walls of the sanctuary were lined with soldiers and riot police carrying guns with bayonets, ready to close it down. Bishop Tutu, already in his opening prayer, began to speak of the evils of apartheid and how the authorities who encouraged it were doomed to fall. He pointed a finger at the police who were there to record his words: "You maybe powerful, very powerful, but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. *You have already lost.*"

Then, they said, after a moment of unbearable tension, the bishop seemed to soften. Coming out from behind the pulpit, he flashed that radiant smile of his and then began to bounce up and down, dancing with glee. "Therefore," he said, "since you have *already* lost, we are *inviting you* to join the *winning side!*"

The crowd roared with laughter, the riot police melted away through the exits and the people *all* began to dance. "Don't go away," says Jesus, "I'm inviting *you* to join the winning side! Don't give up or quit," he pleads, "*stay* on the *winning side!*"

Rev. Steven K. Smith
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