

**THE THIRD
SUNDAY IN
LENT**

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“Righteous? Indignation”

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer.”

Were you surprised to discover during the psalm that this invocation is actually an adaptation of the last verse of Psalm 19?

Well, another surprise is that I want to talk this morning about righteous indignation and self-righteousness – primarily my own, I guess – and I’m going to begin with some words from a source I will quote or paraphrase frequently today, The Very Rev. Anthony F.M. Clavier, now the rector of an Episcopal church in northern Indiana. Clavier starts off a 2003 sermon on today’s gospel with this observation, which is central to what I want to explore in the next few minutes: “Righteous indignation is a tricky thing. One of the good things about the television set is that we can rant and rave at it in the solitude of our homes with doing much harm. Perhaps our spouse has to endure or leave the room, but the world is blissfully ignorant about the threats we may have made to prominent politicians or TV anchors.”¹ to which I probably should add “blissfully ignorant” of the rant unless it’s summer and the windows are open!

But to continue with Clavier: “While some of us are aware that our faith has an ethical dimension, we still prefer our clergy and lay leaders to ‘stick to religion.’”¹ For example, when the Presiding Bishop offers an opinion about war or national policies, or even when our own bishop joins with other faith and secular leaders to call for equality in marriage or social justice in budget priorities or the like, some of us struggle with the very idea of them taking a position on such things. Some of us may even experience our own “righteous indignation” that they would dare to see this kind of advocacy as their “place” or their right as religious leaders.

Now, a very quick acknowledgment in passing: while writing this sermon, I wrestled with the idea of mentioning that a lot of the political hyperbole we’ve witnessed the past few months seems to feature a number of “secular” leaders preaching about the need for one or another set of religious values to be inserted into and enforced in our politic life or government. Obviously, depending upon your own proclivities, I either won or lost that wrestling match – but then, that’s always the case with sermons anyway, isn’t it.?

We’ll get into the subject of righteous indignation and its cousin, self-righteousness, in a minute, but with Fr. Tony Clavier’s help, I first want to develop just a little more context to this event in the Temple that is central to today’s Gospel.

Clavier notes that “To a first-century Jew . . . [there was a huge amount of sentiment and value] centered on . . . the Temple. Whether they lived close to it or far way in Rome or Babylon, the Temple was the magnet that drew them”²

The Temple represented an important aspect of security to the Jews of Jesus’ time. Standing on the site of the great building constructed by Solomon centuries before but then destroyed when the Jews were conquered and enslaved [and marched off lock, stock and barrel to Babylon], “Its restoration symbolized not only religious revival, but the continuity of the nation itself. It was a bit like a combination of the Capitol and the National Cathedral in Washington, but more so.”²

Thus, the destruction of Solomon’s Temple in centuries prior was absolutely a major disaster, and to the Jews, their nation had actually expired with this event. Clavier continues, “They also came to believe that God had left them, for God was said to dwell in the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Jerusalem. Over the centuries, a belief that God had called and chosen Israel to be unique had devolved into nationalism or what we term nowadays “particularism” or “exceptionalism.””²

Of course, we can also recognize that this idea of a nation being especially set aside or exceptional in the eyes of God has also been a common theme in traditional American thinking about our own country and its destiny almost since its founding! But back to the Temple in this narrative.

Clavier goes on to point out that “. . . Israel was [in fact] special, specially called [or set apart] by God. Yet that setting apart – the word ‘holy’ has its root in that concept of being separated – was not intended to justify nationalism, but rather to remind Israel of its calling to be the presence of God for the whole world. Holiness was about what we call mission. Nationalism [or particularism or exceptionalism] had caused their destruction, and with it, the destruction of the Temple itself.”²

Now it’s crucial to this story to know that one of the primary functions of the Temple was for the offering of sacrifices, in fact the only place of sacrifice for the Jews of that day. In this case, Clavier explains, “Sacrifice meant the offering to God of that which God created, whether in the form of wheat or grapes, doves or lambs, depending on the purpose of the sacrifice.” “Sacrifice meant the

offering of life [other than one's own life] on behalf of individuals and families, and once a year, on the Day of Atonement, on behalf of the nation itself." ²

But there was a clever and unholy wrinkle to this practice, which Jesus confronts here head on. Families brought the item of sacrifice to the Temple, but to ensure that the proposed sacrifice was of sufficient quality to be acceptable, it had to be inspected by a priest. Then, if the priest-inspector rejected the object for reasons of purity or quality, a substitute could be purchased on site. In addition, if a pilgrim happened to be travelling from some distant place and the journey was perhaps too far to transport the actual items to be sacrificed, he could also secure a qualified animal for the sacrifice right at the Temple – for a price!

These seems a good place to quote that wonderful character that Dana Carvey played so brilliantly on Saturday Night Live a couple of decades ago, the Church Lady: "How convenient!"

What's more, to amplify this "convenience," the coin of the realm in those days was Roman, and Roman coins were all that most Temple-goers would have had. However, because it was the Temple, those tainted coins (representing the hated occupying power) would not be accepted in the Temple and have to be exchanged for pure Temple currency – again, for a price! Clavier goes on to note how annoyed we find it today when we travel abroad and have to exchange our dollars for a foreign currency, and face not only the exchange rate, but a little something extra for the person doing the exchange. But in the case of the Temple, Clavier points out, ". . . something meant to be holy, special, unique, had been turned into a crooked commercial transaction . . . [controlled by] these crooked merchants, many of whom were priests." ²

This, then, was what confronted Jesus – and what he confronted in return – when he arrived at the Temple in this early narrative in John's Gospel.

Clavier maintains that Jesus was furious, and asks: "Did Jesus lose his temper because the cheating was being done on holy ground? Or did Jesus lose his temper because the poor were being extorted in the name of religion? Take your pick. . . . To Jesus, taking advantage of people in need was as dreadful if it occurred in the street or in the Temple. It didn't matter if the offender was a tax collector or a Temple priest. Jesus took his whip to the crooks in the Temple to make a simple point. The Temple would be destroyed because those who controlled the religion of Israel had betrayed the people [in their search to get "right with God" as they understood it], their nation, and the nation's God." ¹

Clavier goes on to suggest that "The irony of the Gospel story is that ordinary folk, realizing that they could not keep God's law, that they had broken that law, sought to approach God [in the only way they understood and the only way provided] with a sacrifice in order to atone. They were being cheated at the point or place in their life where they should have been nurtured." ¹

Well, you would be right to wonder at this point what all this has to do with righteous indignation and self-righteousness. Fair enough, so let's first define our terms a little. According to my Rodale's Synonym Finder (my bosom companion since graduate school some 40 years ago), "righteous" can also mean blameless, pure at heart, incorrupt, good, guiltless, virtuous, holy, saintly, unerring, taintless, faultless, angelic, sinless, unspotted, pious, godly, God-fearing, or justifiable and a few others thrown in for good measure a wonderful set of qualities!

For "indignation" we can substitute resentment, offense, umbrage, anger, displeasure, disapproval, irritation, annoyance, vexation, and a couple more as well. And a sister word, indignity, can also be translated as an affront or assault, or perhaps an outrage, a slap in the face, abuse, maltreatment, injury, a wound, a sting, a slight or a snub, and so on. Finally, "self-righteous" can also be defined as sanctimonious or holier-than-thou and several other similar labels as well.

So "righteous indignation" can be translated as a blameless, holy, saintly, unerring, faultless, angelic, sinless, pious, God-fearing or justifiable resentment, anger, disapproval, irritation, or vexation about someone or something. And adding self-righteousness to this mix implies that this outrage or resentment or disapproval is further enhanced by a sanctimonious or holier-than-thou attitude. Now I don't know about you, but I don't like to have to think about my own "righteous indignation" or "self-righteousness" in such stark and unflattering terms.

In fact, given much of what I outlined just above, my own self-righteousness clearly presumes an authority of holiness or blamelessness on my part in daring to judge another. And this presumption of justifiable resentment or disapproval on my part is far from the reality of any authority I actually have a right to! Moreover, this becomes even more complicated if I think back to some of the wording of Psalm 19 immediately before the verse we adapted for our invocation this morning. Remember? "Who can tell how often he offends? Cleanse me from my secret faults. . . . [And] keep your servant from presumptuous sins."

But what is it specifically that makes this righteous indignation or self-righteousness on my part a presumptuous sin? Well, I've come to understand this to be the case when I contrast my behavior with the example of truly righteous indignation in today's Gospel – that of Jesus. You may recall that I said that Fr. Tony Clavier characterized Jesus as furious at what he encountered in entering the Temple, and wondered whether he had lost his temper because the cheating was being done on holy ground or because the poor were being extorted in the name of religion?

But there's a different perspective on this in a footnote to this passage in my Oxford Annotated Edition of the New Revised Standard Version which suggests that Jesus' reaction to the scene was "Not an outburst of temper, but the energy of righteousness against religious leaders to whom religion had become a business." Now on the surface of it, the lessons on good and evil, right and wrong, etc. that I've been exposed to in my life-long spiritual journey would seem to equip me to make the same kind of judgment, and offer the same kind of outburst. God knows I've demonstrated this enough to others in sufficient amount – and loudly enough – over time!

But frankly, there's really only one person in this equation that truly possesses the right or "righteousness" to be indignant or exercise judgment, and it's not me! Thus, exploring who truly can lay claim to righteousness vs. who should never presume to do this, I'm forced to confront anew that my "righteous indignation" and my "self-righteousness" in judging others is indeed a presumptuous sin on my part. And secret fault or not, I clearly need to give much more consideration to this.

Furthermore, on reflecting on this in thinking about this gospel, my habit of giving so much credence and importance to my own righteous indignation and self-righteousness pretty clearly runs afoul of the very first words we heard in this morning's reading from Exodus, specifically ". . . you shall have no other gods before me." The truth, you see, is that when I allow my presumption of my own authority to judge to overwhelm the understanding of who actually has true authority and righteousness, then I also have to recognize that I'm guilty of putting the little god of my own righteousness ahead of my fealty to the true God, in the same way that the priests and their assistants in the Temple placed the business of religion above the real work of God - providing for access for atonement and reconciliation.

But once more, there is good news in this as well, and the good news in this case is that Lent provides an ideal opportunity to work on things like this. And to assist me in this, you are all hereby invited and deputized to remind me of this when you find me engaging in it. And don't worry – I'm sure I will continue to create opportunities for you to exercise this ministry.

So finally, to carry the context of Lent just a step further, I also want to circle back to some important words we heard and prayed just two and a half weeks ago on Ash Wednesday, where we were asked to confess and seek repentance for our "pride, hypocrisy and impatience of our lives" and for "all false judgments and uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors and our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us." And to add just a little more to this from that same liturgy, "Restore us, good Lord, and let your anger depart from us; Favorably hear us, for your mercy is great."

So thank you indeed, good Lord, for your mercy truly *is* great. Thank you also for continuing to provide your amazing grace for the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart to become more acceptable in your sight. And do keep your servant from the presumptuous of my own self-righteousness and righteous indignation in my judgment and treatment of others of your creation.

Amen.

1. The Rev. Anthony F.M. Clavier, Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, 3/23/2003, http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/sermons_that_work_6210_ENG_HTM.htm
2. The Very Rev. Anthony F.M. Clavier, Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, 3/11/2012, <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2012/02/17/3-lent-b-march-11-2012/>

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