

In Defense of Anger

Preached at The First Church in Belmont, UU – February 2, 2014

The image many of us have of Jesus is of a man of peace. He is portrayed as a shepherd—a kind, gentle pastoral figure. But the truth is that even Jesus got angry sometimes.

One of my favorite stories about Jesus is when he goes to temple in Jerusalem and turns over the tables of the merchants and moneylenders. This is not a story of Jesus the shepherd. This is a story of Jesus the prophet.

As the story goes, Jesus has come to Jerusalem with his disciples for Passover. When they get to the Temple, they find that the outer courtyard is filled with merchants and moneylenders, all trying to make a profit off of the many pilgrims who had come to the city for the holiday and were now seeking a sacrifice to bring in to the temple. All of this was perfectly legal, and in fact encouraged by the Roman authorities, who were in charge of the Temple at the time. Presumably they got a cut of the profits.

But Jesus didn't like it one bit. To him, this was one more example of the ways in which the ruling Romans and their local Jewish collaborators were ruining traditional Jewish life. It was one more way in which the rich Romans were trying to exploit the less affluent Jews.

And so, when he comes in to the temple and sees the market place it has become, Jesus is pissed off. He is enraged at the way the Romans are allowing the moneylenders and merchants to desecrate this sacred space, and the way the upper class Jews are playing along. So he goes around the Temple, flipping over tables, driving out the cattle and the goats and calling out the merchants and moneylenders.

This is not Jesus the shepherd. This is not Jesus the prince of peace. This is Jesus the radical. This is Jesus the prophet. This is an angry Jesus.

Anger is an emotion that often gets a bad rap. It is equated with violence and hatred. When people get angry we try to placate them; we try to diffuse the anger. We don't want to be around anger because we are afraid. We are scared of the power that lies behind such strong emotions, and we are scared that that power might be turned against us.

It is true that anger can be dangerous. It is true that anger can look like violence and hatred. But there are also times when anger looks a lot like love.

If you look at the history of social justice work in this country and around the world, it is easy to see the important role that anger has played in bringing about positive social change. Just in the last fifty years—the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Liberation Movement, the fight for GLBT equality, the Occupy Movement—all of these were motivated in some part by anger. They were motivated by people just like you and me looking at the world around them and saying "I am angry...I am angry that people of color can't sit at the same lunch counters as white people...I am angry that women get paid 70 cents to every dollar that men make...I am angry that some people can't be open about who they love for fear of losing their jobs...I am angry that

some people make millions while others go hungry.”

These were people who looked around their world and saw oppression and just could not stay silent anymore—just as Jesus, coming in to that temple and seeing it transformed from a sacred space into a den of robbers, could not stay silent anymore.

Their anger came from an impatience with the oppression that surrounded them. And that’s the kind of anger that can look like love. As organizer Joshua Russell Kahn writes: “Integrity gives deep meaning and moral force to anger. We should never come off as mad-for-the-sake-of-being-mad, but rather as reluctantly, genuinely angry in the face of outrageous circumstances.”

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was reluctantly, but genuinely angry when he wrote his famous “Prayer for Peace” during the Vietnam War. He was angry that a war he considered unjust was taking lives. He was angry at what he saw as a lack of compassion in the way the war was carried out. And he was angry at his fellow citizens who were standing idly by letting the war continue. “We are a generation that has lost the capacity for outrage,” he wrote, “We must continue to remind ourselves that in a free society all are involved in what some are doing. Some are guilty, all are responsible.”

His words make me wonder: Are we too a generation that has lost our capacity for outrage?

I remember vividly a conversation in my high school AP English class about feminism. There were nineteen women in the class. I was one of only two of those women who was willing to identify as a feminist. Feminism, of course, being the highly radical notion that women are people...

Why were these young women unwilling to be feminists? Because, as more than one person pointed out: Feminists are angry. The unspoken assumption here being that “angry” is synonymous with “bad.”

And maybe it is true that Feminists are angry. I’m a feminist and I know that I get angry. I get angry that women are socialized to think that our needs are less important than the needs of men. I get angry that women have to work harder to be granted authority in the workplace. I get angry every time I see a woman’s body objectified in the media.

So maybe I am an angry feminist, but is this really a bad thing? I would say no. We need that anger to motivate us to work for real change in our world. As Professor Jeff Stout writes: “Someone who professes love of justice, but is not angered by its violation, is unlikely to stay with the struggle for justice through thick and thin, to display the passion that will motivate others to join in, or to have enough courage to stand up to the powers that be.”

Commitment. Passion. Courage. We can get all of this from anger—anger that, in the words of Audre Lorde, is used as “a powerful source of energy serving progress and change.”

We need anger, and I think, on some level, we know this. But still, I find that we often resist it. We don’t want to listen to anger, especially when we come from a place of privilege, and the anger comes from someone with less privilege.

We are scared of the anger that tells us that we are complicit. We are scared of the anger that

tells us that we are part of oppression; that we are the ones who make oppression happen; that we are the ones who allow oppression to continue. We are scared that that anger might take away some of our privilege. We are scared that it might change our world and yet that's exactly what it should do.

I live in a Brooklyn neighborhood that has experienced a lot of gentrification in the last five years. My walk home from the train takes me through the neighborhood that is right on the disputed border of Crown Heights and Prospect Heights. I say “disputed” because the area is so rapidly changing and the actual classification is not entirely clear. Prospect Heights is a trendy neighborhood, full of bars and cafes, little local boutiques, and lots of white, upper-middle class professionals. Crown Heights is a neighborhood full of storefront churches, 24-hour delis, liquor stores with bullet proof glass, and lots of working-class, African American and Hispanic families. My walk is an incredible amalgamation of these two worlds, with a hip coffee shop and a baby boutique lying directly across the street from the Straightway Church of God in Christ, Inc. Five years ago, muggings were a common occurrence on the street, and rent was dirt-cheap. Today, I feel no fear walking home from the subway late at night, and rent has quadrupled in some places, forcing out families who had lived in the neighborhood for years.

Since I moved to the neighborhood a year and a half ago, I have struggled with the way in which I am complicit in the gentrification that some say is ruining the neighborhood. And I have struggled sometimes with the anger of those whose neighborhood is being taken away from them.

One night, as I was walking home from the train, an older, scruffy-looking African-American man standing on the median as I was crossing the street greeted me a little too exuberantly. I was tired and ready to be home and I assumed he wanted money, as most exuberant greeters in New York do, so I mostly ignored him and walked on. He was not pleased. He started yelling after me: “You people move into our neighborhood and don’t even have the courtesy to say hello!”

His anger made me flush with guilt. Half of me wanted to turn around and apologize...but the other half won, the half that wanted to hurry away even more. My guilt and fear took over. As Lorde says, “it is very difficult to stand still and to listen to another [person]’s voice delineate an agony I do not share, or even one in which I myself may have participated...”

This man’s approach was perhaps not the best one, but nor was my response. His words have stuck with me, and I still wonder what might have happened if I had had the courage to stay and really hear and acknowledge his anger. I still wonder if I will have that courage the next time around. As Lorde writes, “We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor to seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty.”

We need that anger. We need the truths about our world that are carried in that anger. We need to be able to embrace that anger and let it help us to be the change. We need to hold on to that anger and find a way to make it look like love.

Many of you may know the story of Harvey Milk. Milk became the first openly gay man to win an election for public office in the United States when he was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977. He was much loved in his neighborhood, and won the election by 30%. In his short time in office, he became known for championing one of the first gay rights bills in the country, as well as pushing through what was affectionately known as the “Pooper Scooper Law.” (One hint: it has to do with dog owners!)

Unfortunately, his time in office was short. After just a year in office, Milk and the mayor of San Francisco were assassinated by one of Milk's fellow supervisors, who had recently resigned. The city was devastated, especially Milk's neighborhood, the Castro District.

On the night that Harvey Milk was killed, people took to the streets of San Francisco for an impromptu candlelight vigil was held that night, beginning in the Castro and ending at City Hall. Tens of thousands showed up for the vigil. They were angry. They were grieving. This was someone they had loved, someone who had worked for their community, had fought for their rights. They didn't know what to do and so they took to the streets. They were angry, but they weren't an angry mob. They didn't destroy anything. They didn't hurt anyone. They walked together through the dark street, through their anger and grief and they sang. Joan Baez led the crowd in "Amazing Grace," and the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus sang a solemn hymn.

This was an anger that looked a lot like love.

Musician and activist Holly Near was inspired by the anger and love displayed at that vigil to write the song we know as "We are a Gentle Angry People." We are a gentle angry people, and we are singing, singing for our lives.

She says, of that night, "The rage we felt after the assassinations was so powerful...and we had a choice at that moment, to fall prey to grief and rage, or to turn those emotions into a movement... Along with the sadness and the grief and the missing comes the excitement that we as human beings have the potential to change the world — again and again and again. And as I was riding to one of the demonstrations and vigils I began to write this very simple song. And you sang it, and sang it, and sang it."

Sometimes we need to rise up as gentle angry people calling out that oppression the injustice that permeates our world. Sometimes we need to stand up and fight back. And sometimes we need to listen to the anger of the oppressed, even if it forces us to admit to our own complicity in their oppression. Anger can look like hatred. Anger can look like violence. But sometimes anger can look like love.