

March 11, 2011 – Third Sunday of Lent

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Exodus 20:1-17 or 20:1-3, 7-8, 12-17; Psalms 19:8, 9, 10, 11; First Corinthians 1:22-25; John 2:13-25

When I was young there was one particular rule, more than any other norm of behavior imposed by my parents, which determined the family atmosphere. I've come to call it the "peace at all costs rule." That meant that we were never able to express our anger freely or to confront one another directly.

I became afraid of anger very early on. And because I was afraid of it, I repressed it. I said that I "repressed it." I didn't say that I got rid of it. Repression does not rid one of anger. It does not go away. Repressed anger expresses itself in indirect and usually unhealthy ways.

Only in my later years have I learned that anger is an acceptable emotion, even a good emotion. Only in my later years have I learned that anger can be expressed in an appropriate, growth-producing way. Anger expressed directly and without blame does open the possibility of true intimacy and solves problems in a healthy way.

The Gospel today presents us with an image of "the angry Jesus." The writer's purpose in presenting that image of Jesus is not to teach us how to deal with anger, namely, by "making a whip out of cords and [driving people] out of the temple." No! What he is concerned about showing us is Jesus' ZEAL, that is, Jesus' belief in "kingdom values" and his desire to live by them. As verse 17 says, "Zeal for your house will consume me." Physical attack is not what is to be imitated. ZEAL is the virtue to incorporate in your life.

The primary motivation in Jesus' life was the building of God's kingdom, where God's values rule. It was the source of his enthusiasm for life and the source of his willingness to die. Anger is a Christian response to an evil situation. Jesus calls us to resist injustice and evil.

Anger is a reaction to being hurt, or a reaction to some wrong done to us or to others, or a reaction to losing something we treasure. However, anger is also a sin if it expresses selfishness or revenge. It is a sin if it is out of control. It is a sin if it is disproportionate to the reality of the situation. But not only that! Anger is sin if it is repressed, and the reason is because repressed anger inevitably expresses itself in ways that are destructive of life.

The angry Jesus is the one who acts in the presence of abuse and injustice. We can ignore or be indifferent to the evil and abuse around us – "Peace at all costs" – or we can become angry and do something about it.

In our interpersonal relationships anger is inevitable. We can ignore it and watch it destroy our relationships with resentment, or we can learn to express it in a way that builds relationships and intimacy. The issue is how to express anger.

Let me offer you two guidelines for expressing healthy anger, something to think about this week: Express it directly and specifically; and express it in words that do not attack the other person's core value.

What do I mean by that? What I mean is find a way to say directly and calmly to the person who makes you angry something like, "When you do such-and-such (name a particular action or behavior), I feel angry." Do not say things like, "I hate you because you did such-and-such," or "You are no good because you did such-and-such."

Anger expressed directly and specifically, without attacking a person's core value, is the first step in developing healthy and intimate relationships. Challenge yourself to take the first step this week.

This week let us, as a people ZEALOUS for the Kingdom after the model of Jesus, consciously work at becoming people who admit our anger and express it appropriately.

Let us respond directly this week to injustice and abuse. Let us do it directly and clearly. Let us build relationships that are real, intimate, and that advance the coming of the Kingdom in our midst.

May zeal for God's house consume us this week!