

Matthew 9:2-13

There is such a thing as righteous indignation. Sometimes we might witness something that is so disdainful, so wrong, so immoral, that we are totally justified in being offended, in having feelings of indignation, and even expressing those feelings with words or actions. Righteous indignation means that you are acting in accord with divine or moral law, and that you are, in a sense, justified in being angry.

We know that one can be angry and still be righteous because Jesus himself was angry, for example, when he entered that synagogue in Capernaum and saw the hardened hearts of the Pharisees who were more concerned about their easy rules and regulations on the Sabbath than the restoration of the withered hand of a poor man. And so it says he looked at them with anger. Or, when our Lord cleared the temple of the moneychangers, his anger was even expressed in a forceful and passionate way.

And so, righteous indignation is a justifiable contempt and loathing of a situation or a behavior that is just not right. Many things about contemporary society, or even individuals, can cause righteous indignation to well up in us. When we see a disregard for the standards of God's law on matters such as sexuality, abortion, or justice or the complete breakdown, it seems, of an ethical standard in the financial industry, it is perfectly legitimate to experience an indignation, a distaste and even anger, over such things.

When some students and I went to Chicago to visit the Mosque or the Hindu Temple, and we witnessed with sadness the multitudes of people bowing down to a false god, or paying homage to a hodgepodge of statues and images of gold and bronze and wood and stone, made by the hands of men—well, that certainly was a cause for righteous indignation.

On the other hand, there is also what might be called, not a righteous indignation, but a self-righteous indignation. Self-righteous indignation does not arise out seeing something that is completely at odds with God's holy law, a righteous motive, but rather it arises from making yourself the standard of righteousness.

Famous science fiction writer, David Brin, for some reason decided to study addictive behavior. Usually we think of drinking, or drugs, or pornography, or gambling or some such thing when we think of addictive behavior. But Brin postulates that the most common, but also unstudied, form of addictive behavior is self-righteous indignation. He calls self-righteous indignation a "paradigm of self-reinforcement." In other words, you go down that road because, while normally righteous indignation is not something pleasurable, its not something you seek, self-righteous indignation actually gives you pleasure. And so he was studying "the brain processes of self-reinforcement."

He says: "We all know self-righteous people. (And, if we are honest, many of us will admit having wallowed in this state ourselves, either occasionally or in frequent rhythm.) It is a familiar and rather normal human condition, supported -- even promulgated -- by messages in mass media. While there are many drawbacks, self-righteousness can also be heady, seductive, and even... well... addictive. Any truly honest person will admit that the state *feels good*. The pleasure of knowing, with subjective certainty, that you are *right* and your opponents are deeply, despicably *wrong*. Sanctimony, or a sense of self-righteous outrage, can feel so intense and delicious that many people actively seek to return to it, again and again."

In the text that we have read this morning, from Matthew Chapter 9, we see two episodes—two different episodes—in the life of Christ. But they have one thing in common. In the first, Jesus forgives the sins of a crippled man, who is brought to him by his friends. But the scribes began saying to themselves, "He blasphemous." It was not righteous indignation led them

to make that charge, but self-righteous indignation, and Jesus confronts them directly: “Why are you thinking evil in your hearts?”

In the second episode, our Lord has gone to the house of Matthew, and there were many other sinners there, eating together with him. This time it was the self-righteous indignation of the Pharisees: “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Again, Jesus confronts them head on: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice, for I have come not to call the righteous—what he really means is self-righteous—I have not come not to call the self-righteous, but sinners.”

But self-righteousness feels so good! It is so good when we can put others down to make ourselves look good. It feels so good to do like the scribes, and put our man-made rules and piety and sensibilities above the needs of others. It feels so good to do like the Pharisees, and look down upon all the “sinners” around us, to experience that exhilaration, that rush, of self-righteous indignation. It is, as David Brin said, a nice paradigm of self-reinforcement.

But when you think about it, it’s a pretty sick, isn’t it? To build yourself up, by tearing others down.

Now is the time to repent. Now is the day of the Lord. The kingdom of heaven has drawn near. Jesus said: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. . . . For I came to call not the righteous, but sinners.” He came for you and me. And thanks be to God! Amen.