

“Yes, I’m Angry: Responding to the Injustices in Our World Today”

Sara Lewis

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First Reading: From This One Wild and Precious Life by Sarah Wilson:

Have you heard of Kali, the Hindu goddess of rage?

To cut a long and fun mythological story to a paragraph, once upon a time the god Shiva was being a lazy, flaccid bloke, spending all his time meditating and failing to protect the Earth. So the other deities sent him the goddess Shakti (who takes the form of Kali, goddess of rage, when required) to coax him into waking the [Bleep] up. Anyway, a bunch of things happened where some other deity dudes do the wrong thing by Shakti and put power in the way of good, which maddens Shakti, and then Shiva tells her unhelpfully to (eek) “calm down” and then basically “forbids” her from speaking up. At which point Shakti transforms into Kali, a formidable monster-thing with fangs and a necklace of severed male heads. And she rages. Shiva gets the point quite quickly, lifts his game and re-acknowledges the importance of the feminine.

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Most myths stand the test of time, in metaphor form. I find comfort in the universal truths they spell out, and, in this case, the most bodacious acknowledgement that rage ... is often entirely appropriate and purposeful.

Second Reading: “The Flawed Understanding of Martin Luther King, Jr.” By Aisha Ansano

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a radical. He was called “the most dangerous man in America” by the FBI and had a 17,000 page FBI file at the time of his death.

It wasn’t just KKK members or those in positions of power who disagreed with him or hated him. As Cornel West explains in his book *The Radical King*, by the time of King's death, most of the country didn't like him.

“There was intense FBI pressure, including attempts to make him commit suicide,” West reminds us. “The black civil rights leadership was trashing him. The white establishment had rejected him. The young black revolutionaries were dismissing him.”

Over the course of his life, King was not a man who was loved by most; in fact, he was hated by a select few. He was an incredibly maligned man by the time he died. And yet we never talk about that.

Instead, we praise and honor him and hold him up as the highest standard of the struggle for justice. We as a society measure all who struggle for justice against Dr. King, but not against who he actually was. We measure those who struggle for justice against who we have decided Dr. King was: a sanitized version of the actual man.

As a society, we tell activists that their protests are too unruly, their demands too harsh, their voices too strident, their methods too stringent. We have decided as a society that there is one way to struggle for justice, and it’s the way we like to imagine King struggled for justice — even though it’s not the way he actually did.

In the summer of 2016, protesters took to the streets around the country, condemning police brutality and proclaiming that black lives matter. As has happened over and over again with these sorts of protests, many people criticized their methods and tactics. In a press conference, Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed stated “Dr. King would never take a freeway.”

Anyone remember the powerful thing King organized: the marches from Selma to Montgomery? The ones that entailed several hundred people walking down a highway and crossing a bridge, blocking cars from being able to drive on it? The flawed understanding of King is everywhere, and it has seeped into our society’s

understanding of what is acceptable or appropriate in the struggle for racial justice.

Sermon/Homily: Yes, I'm Angry: Responding to the Injustices in Our World Today

Last November, when Kyle Rittenhouse was found Not Guilty of charges related to his shooting and killing of two unarmed protesters, I found myself just incredibly angry. In fact, I was so angry that I needed to just blast some good anger music at max volume and scream and shout for a little bit. My choice of music was Rage Against the Machine's song "Killing in the Name Of", so you can just picture me head banging and screaming to that song for your mental image of how this worked.

I get angry sometimes. Very angry. I feel anger about the racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, economic exploitation, destruction of nature and our shared environment and future, war, violence, neglect of those in need, and general lack of compassion in the world, to name a few. Really, I wonder how I could possibly not be angry about all of that. Angry and heart broken.

I am angry and heart broken. Because I care, because I feel. Yes, I am heart broken. And yes, I am very, very angry.

Now, some of you are probably nodding along and saying "yes! Me too!". Others may be feeling uncomfortable, because anger is a "bad" emotion that we "shouldn't" feel. It depends on your socialization just how much you feel "allowed" to feel angry. Although these are just generalizations, typically men are socialized to be allowed more anger than women, and there are also class, race, and generational differences in how much we may feel we are "allowed" to be angry. And in how others will perceive and react to our anger.

And then there is our religious and spiritual grounding and how we perceive anger fits into that framework. Are religious and spiritual people allowed to feel anger? Aren't we

seeking inner and outer peace? Aren't we supposed to "turn the other cheek"? Aren't we all about Love?

Yes, many spiritual teachings point us toward non-attachment and inner contentment and equanimity. But we also have the examples of the Jewish and Christian traditions with the Hebrew Prophets bravely, and angrily, preaching against the injustices of their times, and the example of Jesus flipping over the tables in the temple in his anger. They had righteous anger as a response to injustice and other wrongs of the world.

Another religious and social justice model for us is Martin Luther King, Jr., who developed and taught a theology and philosophy of non-violent resistance to injustice. As we heard in our second reading today, MLK's legacy is sometimes invoked as a rebuke for those who express anger, respond to injustices, or engage in protest in ways that are unlawful or uncivil. There is a sanitized version of MLK that is taught as some sort of ideal of a justice seeker who was always peaceful, with a version of peaceful that goes beyond non-violence and calls for something comfortable and non-challenging. This is not who the real Dr King was, or how he operated in his work for social justice, how he understood the theological and philosophical grounding of that work, or how people reacted to him in his own time. All of this came after, as the social myth of MLK was created, much like it has also been created around Nelson Mandela.

In his book, *The Radical King*, Cornel West writes:

"King and Mandela are the two towering public figures in the past fifty years in the world. Both have been Santa-Clausified – tamed, domesticated, sanitized, and sterilized – into nonthreatening and smiling old men with toys in their bags and forgiveness in their hearts. Yet both were radical and revolutionary. They were hunted, hated, and hurt by the powers that be. And both had radical love."

Radical love. For me, that phrase means a big love, what Dr King used the Greek word "agape" to describe ... love for everyone, for the larger community, for the wider world.

And a radical love cannot be neutral when faced with injustice. Radical love calls for shaking the whole thing up if we have to in order to create justice and liberation for all. Dr King frequently called for that sort of radical, reshape it from the ground up, change to our society and the world. He also called for an active resistance to the lull of the status quo and conformity that may keep us from seeking change.

It's not hard to imagine Dr. King as approving of the protest started by football player Colin Kaepernick, who began kneeling for the National Anthem before games. This was a peaceful and respectful act of protest. But it's telling that for many people even this peaceful and non-disruptive protest was seen as unacceptable and disrespectful. The racial justice protests and uprisings of the last few years were seen as unacceptably destructive or angry many more people. We often get so busy debating whether the protest is "done right" that we don't get to debating the injustices that provoked the protest.

This way that tone policing and calling for "civility" has been used to maintain the status quo and our hierarchies of power, including white supremacy culture, is explored in the book *Against Civility: the Hidden Racism in Our Obsession with Civility* by Alex Zamalin. The author writes:

"Civility is a central term through which racial inequality has been maintained. Civility is exalted in the language of slaveholders, segregationists, lynch mobs, and eugenicists. ... And, surprisingly, it is elevated in the language of well-intentioned liberals, self-described moderates, and devout progressives. All of them traffic in ideas about public etiquette to declare what counts as good citizenship and what doesn't. From slavery to Jim Crow, to black ghettoization, to mass incarceration, to police brutality, the idea of civility has been enlisted to treat black suffering with apathy or to maintain the status quo. Worse, it has been a tool for silencing dissent, repressing political participation, enforcing economic inequality, and justifying violence upon people of color."

History is full of times that we can look back on now and say that the agitators and dissidents were right, and the polite and civil people were in the wrong. And yet, we continue to hear the siren cry of civility. Now, let me be clear, when I critique civility I am not critiquing the idea that we should treat all people with compassion and respect. People continue to have inherent worth and dignity. But not all their ideas or actions do, and being challenged or made uncomfortable is not the same as being treated badly. Last week as we revisited the January 6th Insurrection at its one-year anniversary, I heard many people on news programs calling for a return to civility, and for more dialogue and trying to see the viewpoints of the other.

But the problem I see with that call to peace is that it is a false peace, for there can be no real peace without justice. We can have a very “civil” society where no one ever acts out and yet many are still oppressed and even crushed under systems. The call of love is not to be polite and well-behaved, it is to create a world where all are free and treated with inherent worth and dignity.

And so, while the violence of the Jan 6th insurrection was absolutely wrong, I disagree that what we need to do is to meet it with greater civility and understanding. I can't meet a nazi half-way, and while I can respect and even love the inherent worth and humanity of all people, I refuse to become tolerant of intolerance.

Sometimes this focus on civility is a deliberate and cynical choice to manipulate the debate and put those calling for justice on the defensive, having to justify themselves rather than be able to effect the changes they are calling for. Other times I believe many of us do this without thinking, because the status quo and civility are more comfortable and feel safer than the challenges being brought. The people bringing the challenge, the protesters in our midst, become the perceived problem.

Last year the comedian host of The Daily Show, Trevor Noah, put it this way:

“I think sometimes in society, people get more focused on the symptoms than of the cause,” I think the real question we should be asking is, “why does there need to be a protest in the first place?”

But the thing is, many of us, often because of our own privilege, don't become aware of the problem until we are confronted by the symptom ... the protests, the unhappy and angry people and so we do focus on the symptoms. This applies to our “squeaky wheels” who speak up in a meeting or at the family dinner table just as much as it does to how we react to a protest on the street.

We do need to hear each other and get to causes. We need to listen to everyone, from all viewpoints. Rather than enforcing rules of civility and comfort, we need to be seeking to bring about greater justice, liberation, equity, and love for all beings and for our collective interdependent planet.

Even with the case of Jan 6th insurrectionists, we should look to the causes. Where the cause is a need for greater understanding, compassion, education, opportunity, justice, etc, we should all work to address the cause. But not all causes are the same. I cannot affirm xenophobia, racism, or the fear of losing white privilege as being morally equal to the desire for freedom and equity. I won't hate the people, but their causes, ideas, and actions make me angry.

I think that is the difference between a healthy and a destructive anger. Destructive anger against other people is basically hate, something which requires that we make them into the “other” and somehow forget our shared humanity and inter-relatedness. But anger, at times, is a healthy feeling that tells us that something that has happened is not right. Anger at events, ideas, and actions is different from hating or dehumanizing other people.

Dr. King spent a great deal of ink and words on the subject of bitterness and hatred. He counseled black people not to hate white racists, not because the white racists had a

valid cause they were fighting for but because hating and bitterness bring down the people who hate and feel bitter more than they do the subjects of their feelings and can lead to a cycle of never-ending personal attacks rather than to systemic change.

Interestingly to me, in what I have read, Dr. King didn't really talk about anger at all. He used other words that I would equate with anger – Dissatisfaction for instance. While that word can sound so tame, just imagine it shouted with passion – we should be most Dissatisfied with anything less than justice for all.

And he understood and sympathized with the anger of oppressed people who longed to throw off the yoke of their oppression. Reading between the lines, I believe Dr. King understood the fire of anger that I feel in my own belly.

Dr. King's nonviolent methods were not comfortable, and not always "civil" by everyone's definition of that word. While he asked people to practice strict non-violence, even refraining from yelling or calling names, he also blocked traffic, went where he wasn't wanted, refused to be quiet or patient, and disrupted business as usual in whatever non-violent ways possible. And as the push for liberation and equity for African Americans moved away from non-violence and cities across America experienced riots, Dr. King wrestled with what was the effective path forward but never called for a retreat into acquiescence with the ways things were.

In 1968, in a speech to the Local 1199 union in NY City, Dr King said: "The problem with a riot is that it can always be halted by superior force, so I couldn't advise that. On the other hand, I couldn't advise following a path of Martin Luther King just sitting around signing statements, and writing articles condemning the rioters, or engaging in a process of timid supplications for justice. The fact is that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor. It must be demanded by the oppressed."

We need our squeaky wheels and our protesters, because freedom must be demanded. We cannot just be nice, polite people and tolerate bad behaviors and systemic

injustices. When we witness or experience a microaggression, we may need to confront the person who committed it, even if that is not comfortable, and even if that is perceived as impolite. When we stand witness to the larger, systemic, wrongs in our world, we have to organize to try to change them and we have to show up and show our opposition to them.

And our anger may be what moves us to those actions. It's fine to feel angry when microaggressions are being committed in your community. It's fine to be angry when you are not respected in your full humanity or you are oppressed. It's fine to be angry when you see exploitation and abuse and power hoarding. The anger is the signal that something is wrong. Listen to it.

But then what do you do with that anger? Maybe you might need to just rage (non-violently and non-destructively). Maybe, like me, you just need some really loud music and you need to scream. Do it! Or smash up some play dough or clay, punch your pillow, go for a run, or any of the other non-harmful options you can think of to move some of that emotion and energy through your body and release it a bit.

You can also channel it and let it fuel your actions. Again, channel it in ways that are non-destructive to you and others, but channel it. In our story today, if the other animals hadn't ever got adequately fed up with the Bear, the bear would have kept on being unfair to them. They had to claim their truth, their dissatisfaction, their anger, and recognize their power to make change.

We also have to be fed up with how things have been. We need to be fed up with economic exploitation and inequality. We need to be fed up with corruption and the decaying of our democracy. We need to be fed up with all the "isms" of oppression and inequity that come from hierarchies of valuing some humans and some ways of being human over others. We need to be fed up with violence, intimidation, and abuse. We need to be fed up with the destruction of nature and our planet for the profit of a few. We

need to be fed up with anything less than the beloved community sharing and caring for this one wild and precious planet we all call home.

And we need to do something about it. Sure, we cannot wave a magic wand and make things change, but showing up and shouting and waving signs is still better than just shrugging and sitting back. We have different levels of privilege in this society, and different resources and abilities, but we all have some power, some way to show up for what is right. And if you recognize that you carry privilege and have resources, figure out how to use those to make things better for us all. Figure out where and how you can show up and make yourself heard. It may be within your family, or in a work or community meeting. It may be on the streets. It may be on social media. It may be here within the congregation. Do it all, whatever is within your power.

Claim the power you have. Claim the anger you hold. And use them. They are not taboo, bad, or negative in themselves. Channel them with love. As Dr King told the 1967 annual convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference:

“One of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites, polar opposites, so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love. ... Now we got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best, power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.”

Think about that. Power – power at its best, is love implementing the demands of justice. And Justice, at it's best, is love correcting everything that stands against love. What are the demands of justice? And how do we implement them? What is standing against love? And how do we correct it? May we be a people who claim both our power and our love, acknowledging our anger in healthy ways, and working always to bring about justice and love in this world. May we strive always to answer the call, even though change seems far off.

I'll close with the words of Dr King, again from his 1967 speech to the SCLC:

“Let this affirmation be our ringing cry. It will give us the courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe working to pull down the gigantic mountain of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.

Let us realize that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Let us realize that William Cullen Bryant is right: Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again. Let us go out realizing that the Bible is right: be not deceived, God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. This is our hope for the future, and with this faith we will be able to sing in some not too distant tomorrow, with a cosmic past tense: We have overcome. We have overcome. Deep in my heart, I did believe we would overcome.”