

Righteous Indignation  
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson  
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Weeks after I had decided to do this sermon, I read and heard about the death in Northern Ireland of Rev. Ian Paisley, the firebrand Presbyterian minister, and political leader. When Paisley wasn't preaching against homosexuality and Catholicism, he was driving one hard political campaign after another against civil rights for Northern Ireland's Catholic minority and helped to form and gave his blessings to violent Protestant paramilitary militias.

For over thirty years growing up and following the news, for me, Paisley embodied just about everything I didn't like about organized religion and its male leadership. He was a big-mouthed, self-righteous, swaggering, zealous, bigoted, arrogant man, sure of himself and the righteousness of his cause, prone to Bible thumping and table pounding. I couldn't help smiling a bit listening to an archived CBC interview with him from the 80s, when the "As It Happens" host questioned whether he thought it was appropriate for a Christian minister to preach a gospel of violence. To which he responded: "But my dear, that just shows you don't know your Bible. For Jesus said, 'I have *not* come to bring *peace* [to the earth], *but* a *sword*.'"

He got that quote right; it was a gift that kept on giving to Paisley and his people for decades. It underlines, not only that many of our religions feed from roots sunk deep in the soil of anger and violence—and shows that a binary view of the Bible—with its so-called Old Testament God of wrath morphing into the Sweet Jesus God of Love in the New Testament—is wishful thinking. Remember that New Testament scene with Jesus upending the tables and whipping the money changers out of the Temple? Not exactly the-meek-turn-the-other-cheek-Lamb-of-God of Sunday School pieties, is it?

As a teenager, seething with hormones and sticking-it-to-the-man resentments, heartsick over Vietnam, urban riots and poverty in my nation of birth, and turned off by the Ian Paisley like leaders of my own church, it was one of the few places in the Bible where I could actually relate to the son the God. He walked into the Temple forecourt full of worshipful expectations thinking to find a sacred place and a holy people—and bang! What a scene of cruel disappointment! Instead of a place of worship, he saw a den of thieves. In a flash, it all fell short of his dreams, his hopes! And like a lover cruelly deceived, his passionate, tender, visionary devotion flared into a storm of righteous indignation.

Indignation—scornful anger at unjust, unfair, unworthy conduct or treatment or behaviour. Indignation—the kind that throws tables around the Temple; the kind that makes you want to hurl the TV out the window, the kind that makes you want to pick up a banner and sign a petition—Boko Haram kidnappings, ISIS executions, targeted drone assassinations, pervasive surveillance, forced psychiatric drugging, Canadian mining companies running amok, chronic poverty and disempowerment of First Nations people, African refugees capsizing in the Mediterranean Sea, Hamas missiles, and Israel bombing the beejeezus out of Gaza. Indignation fueled by manic, incessant media coverage bringing all the mayhem into our homes and hearts and heads. Indignation rising from that aching desire and need of ours, so deeply felt, to see the long arc of the moral universe bending toward justice; *if only it wouldn't take so long!* If only there weren't so many zig zags, false starts, faithless lovers, and feckless leaders. If only there wasn't so much blood, toil and tears.

That indignation, I think, can come from a good place in us. We're children of the Enlightenment, and nourished, as well, on the ebb tides of whatever was good about the religions in which we grew up. Our minds and hearts are filled, in the words of Immanuel Kant, “with ever-increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more intensely...[our] thoughts [and feelings are] drawn to...the starry heavens above...and the moral law within...” We would have that wonder and awe flowing untrammelled within and around us. Skies undefiled, pollution free, stars unfurled and wheeling over our heads in their glory, our dear earth unmarred and undefiled by our rapacious greed for more and ever more things to consume. And the moral law within which immediately, intuitively knows and cherishes the inherent worth and dignity of each and all?—how it moves us! How we long to see “justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream!”

We revile and object to rights denied, to cities and people, innocents, crushed by the engines of war and fundamentalist furies dragged up from the Bronze Age and the pits of hell and set loose with all the magnified mayhem of modern technology, running roughshod and wild over our bodies and souls, our hopes and dreams.

Indignation—scornful anger at unjust, unfair, unworthy conduct or treatment or behaviour. I think it's fair enough for me to say that I share with you indignation over all kinds unjust, unworthy and unfair words and deeds. With you, I search and reach out for some way to cope and then express my appalled feelings and thoughts at that which would malign, damage

and do violence to human dignity and life and the precious wonder and beauty of the interdependent web of all things. It's the "righteous" part of the term righteous indignation that gives me pause. And to be honest, it's the "scornful anger" part of the definition of "indignation" that trips me up as well.

Surely, if we're talking about Jesus, his indignation at seeing the Temple taken over as a site for wheeling dealing financial transactions, don't we see his anger as coming from a "righteous" place? But in the eyes of the Roman occupation forces, what he did was equivalent to storming the New York Stock Exchange. Can you imagine how quickly SWAT teams would get called in today? How media and politicians would rush to label him a terrorist? And what would we be left to think? (I sat with that and then found myself asking: was it *really* worth it, after all, being nailed up on the cross? *Perhaps it was for whatever solace it's brought* to those who truly suffer—feeling, hoping that a crucified god, abandoned under a pitiless sky in a godforsaken place, may understand more, may have more pity for them and their pain than a remote god of glory who never stepped down from crown and throne, who never left the gated wonderland of heaven.)

I grew up in a culture with more than its share of "righteous indignation," its Ian Paisley types—and most of it, and them, was perverse and deeply alienating. I thought that here among Unitarians, I'd find some kind of sanctuary, some respite. That our indignation would be kindled from something like the same fires; and what might pass as "righteous" would be more real and modest, commensurate with our values and numbers, and drawn from a shared, kin-like, intense wonder and awe set quietly ablaze by the "starry heavens above," and the "moral law within" which step by step lights our path as we journey along the "long arc of the moral universe" that bends (we hope!) toward justice. For the most part, so I have found us and, verily, for the most part, such has been my experience.

This sermon didn't start with Ian Paisley's death. In some ways it began in the first months I arrived here when the Bush administration was trying to drag Canada into the invasion of Iraq; and I well recall that we were righteously indignant about the prospect of our government knuckling under to that vicious, misguided folly.

I was invited as a religious leader type to be part of an organizing committee for a big march and demonstration. It was an unforgettable evening. There were about twenty people sitting around tables forming a hollow square. Mostly men, and the atmosphere was a bit

intense, especially coming from one end of the tables and a group of men who wanted Israel's occupation of Palestine to be a central issue in the march and rally. That was not necessarily the problem; it was how they singled out a woman in the room representing a group called Jewish Lawyers Against the War. The grimness and misogyny from their end of the table were bad enough; worse was the way the anger of these men toward the State of Israel objectified the female lawyer. It felt like she was no longer truly a person in their eyes, but a symbol, a stand-in for a nation state and a whole people for whom these men displayed a barely contained, visceral dislike. There we were gathered against a war, and there was hate in that room and a woman unsafe in the presence of those men.

Ninety years ago, the Czech playwright and journalist Karel Capek wrote an essay: "Why Am I Not a Communist?" Here's just one passage from this great essay:

I would feel lighter if I was [a communist]. Then I would live under the impression that I was contributing to the rectification of the world as fiercely as possible; I would believe that I sided with the poor against the rich, the hungry against the money-bags; I would know what to think about what, what to hate, what to ignore. Instead, I'm like a naked man in the brambles, empty handed, not covered by any doctrine, aware that I am powerless to help the world, and often not knowing how to protect my conscience. If my heart is on the side of the poor, why on earth am I not a communist?

Because I am on the side of the poor.

That was my last meeting with that organizing committee; but soon after I was proud, and it felt right, to join with members of this congregation and thousands of Vancouverites in marching in the rain against the invasion of Iraq in the Fall of 2002.

I've lived long enough in a world with more than its share of violence, injustice, and inequity to overflow countless vessels of righteous indignation. Times past counting of impassioned conversations, letters written, banners held high, marches in the streets and petitions signed. However, twice this year, in spite of my own long burning fuse of indignation, I could not sign off on a resolution and a petition, and I want to tell you why.

Last May, delegates to the Canadian Unitarian Council's Annual Meeting, were called on to vote in favour of a Study Resolution entitled "Human Rights in Palestine and Israel." If the resolution passed, it would, in principle, have committed Unitarian congregations to a two-year

process of study that would lead, in the end, to voting on an action Resolution. While I have no doubts that the feelings that led to writing and proposing this resolution came from a good and sincere place, and for good reasons, I could not vote in its favour. I have been studying the tragedy that is Israel Palestine for over forty years. I have been critical of Israel's Occupation of Palestinian territory, and of the whole Greater Israel movement. As well, I have grieved over the violence and human rights violations on both sides. But I found the language of the Resolution and its accompanying background study material sadly superficial, inaccurate, and heavily slanted toward a pre-determined outcome.

Any significant resolution of the Israel Palestine issue is not going to be affected, influenced, or determined in any way by a handful of Canadian Unitarians filled with righteous indignation passing resolutions. It will be resolved by the influence and pressure of international political bodies, and most importantly, by Israelis and Palestinians themselves when they decide that the time is long past for them to stop turning the murderous grindstone of hate and violence that's killing, maiming and deeply traumatizing their own people. Let me go further with this.

Last Spring, when I asked a number of Canadian Unitarian young adult leaders to identify their social justice priorities, they said: growing domestic income inequality, homelessness and unaffordable housing, global warming, Canadian mining companies pillaging and violating human rights in the Third World, and First Nations sovereignty. *What about their concerns, their voice in the Canadian Unitarian world?* I think that we need to focus on getting our own social justice house in order before treading into a landscape littered with the debris of decades of righteous intentions, petitions and resolutions that have had absolutely no effective impact or outcome whatsoever.

And I have to add—though this may be a bit obscure—that we are a people with a history of our own, whether we like it or not. For nearly four hundred years, Unitarians believed and pressed the case that ours was the original (!), most enlightened and best version of Christianity. (It's true.) And that progressive Christian theology saw venerable Unitarians like Joseph Priestley, William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker (whom I otherwise deeply admire) telling Jews their religion was anachronistic, legalistic and dead, and that they should give it up and become Unitarian Christians. It's what the churches of all stripes have been telling Jews and pressuring them to do for 2000 years and with absolutely dreadful results. It's long past time for churches and their members to take a good look at themselves, their histories and theologies

before passing high minded resolutions. If, as individuals, we want to talk resolutions, divestment, boycotts, etc., my advice is to do it in the context of secular NGOs and action via national and international politics, NOT through the voice or institutions of our religion. We just don't occupy the moral high ground on this one, believe me.

And then there was Gaza last summer: missiles, bombing, misery, death and destruction, and I just wanted to tear my hair out, and I haven't got much left. And then a petition came to me, with a request to sign, an "Open Letter" to our political leaders; and I just couldn't do it. Thinking: where's our voice been, our open letters over the death, destruction and mayhem taking place *this year* in Syria, Nigeria, South Sudan, Iraq and on and on? (Where our fervent calls for intercession, our indignation, over wage slavery and murderous working conditions in Bangladesh just so that we can buy clothes cheaply off the rack?)

In 1916, Britain and France carved up the Middle East into imperial fiefdoms as though they owned the world; and we've been living with the dreadful consequences ever since. If that Study Resolution, if that petition had shown one sign that acknowledged and confessed our EuroCanadianAmerican genocidal past, our world wars, rapacious economies, our assault on the environment, our supersessionist theologies, the traumas beyond number that we have caused—if they'd said something like this, and sincerely asked for something like forgiveness, and *then* from a place of remorse and with humility asked the afflicted, the grieving, the traumatized on all sides what we, as people of faith could do, how we could be of service, and *then truly* listened....if I'd seen that kind of self awareness and less righteous indignation, I want to think I could have supported a Resolution and signed a petition. But I think that, like with most anger, most of the time, righteous indignation is a failure of religious consciousness; and as anger will, when we're righteously irate, we end up doing more thoughtless harm than good.

I don't want to end these remarks with you and me in the dumps—so consider the following modest proposals. If you're concerned about global warming, think twice before you hop in your car: how can I bundle errands together, can I car pool, can I take a bus, take a walk? If you're concerned about violations of human rights close to home—there are people in distress being put in restraints and seclusion, invaded by the police in their homes and forcibly injected with psych drugs in this city—actions that the UN calls torture. You could join us 5:30-7pm on the *first Thursday* of every month for a potluck and letter writing where we call for these practices to cease. If you're concerned about homelessness and our cross-Canada, full-spectrum

housing crisis, you could join us 5:30-7pm on the *third Thursday* of every month for a potluck and letter writing where we write to our elected officials and call for a credible, national affordable housing strategy. We've been doing that for over three years, and it's not too late for you to join us.

If you want to study the Palestine Israel crisis—read Michael Lerner's *Embracing Israel/Palestine: A Strategy to Heal and Transform the Middle East*. It's the best, most balanced and accessible book I know of that recounts the history of the conflict and that lays out proposals for healing that trauma. And finally, if we want to do more than study the issue, or pass dead-end resolutions and sign ineffectual petitions about Israel and Palestine—I have practically *begged* the Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice organization and our own Social Justice Committee to connect with and find out how we can support groups in Israel and Palestine like the human rights organization B' Tselem, and peer support groups like Family Circle and Combatants for Peace--joint Palestinian and Israeli NGOs that bring families and former fighters together in honest dialogue, mutual support, trauma recovery and nonviolent resistance against medieval religious fundamentalism and the murderous politics of their political elites.

We need not stand idly by. We can concretely, realistically channel our righteous indignation into streams of mercy and compassion. With some humility, we may even dare to reach up to that “long arc of the moral universe” and do our part to bend it toward justice.

May it be so.