

# Rolheiser: Beyond criticism and anger

Recently I attended a symposium where the keynote speaker was a man exactly my age. Since we had both lived through the same cultural and religious changes in our lives, I resonated with much of what he said and with how he felt about things. And in his assessment of both the state of affairs in our politics and our churches today, he was pretty critical, even angry.

Not without reason.

In both our governments and our churches today there isn't just a bitter polarization and an absence of fundamental charity and respect, there's also a lot of seemingly inexcusable blindness, lack of transparency, and self-serving dishonesty.

Our speaker was plenty eager to point these out.

And for the most part, I agreed with him. I feel the same way that he does. The current state of affairs, whether you're looking at politics or the churches, is depressing, bitterly polarized, and cannot but leave you feeling frustrated and accusatory at those whom you deem responsible for the blindness, dishonesty, and injustice that seem inexcusable.

But, while I shared much of his truth and his feelings, I didn't share where he landed.

He landed in pessimism and anger, seemingly unable to find anything other than indignation within which to stand. He also ended very negative in terms of his attitude towards those whom he blames for the problem.

I can't fault his truth and I can't fault his feelings. They're understandable. But I'm not at ease with where he landed. Bitterness and anger, no matter how justified, are not a good place to stay.

Both Jesus and what's noble inside of us invite us to move beyond anger and indignation.

Beyond anger, beyond indignation, and beyond justified criticism of all that's dishonest and unjust, lies an invitation to a deeper empathy. This invitation doesn't ask us to stop being prophetic in the face of what's wrong but it asks us to be prophetic in a deeper way. A prophet, as Daniel Berrigan so often said, makes a vow of love, not of alienation.

But that's not easy to do.

In the face of injustice, dishonesty, and willful blindness, all of our natural instincts militate against empathy. Up to a point, this is healthy and shows

that we're still morally robust. We should feel anger and indignation in the face of what's wrong.

It's understandable too that we might also feel some hateful, judgmental, thoughts towards those whom we deem responsible.

But that's a beginning (a healthy enough starting point) but it's not where we're meant to stay. We're called to move towards something deeper, namely, an empathy which previously we did not access. Deep anger invites deep empathy.

At the truly bitter moments of our lives, when we're feeling overwhelmed by feelings of misunderstanding, slight, injustice, and rightful indignation and we're staring across at those whom we deem responsible for the situation, anger and hatred will naturally arise within us. It's okay to dwell with them for a time (because anger is an important mode of grieving) but, after a time we need to move on.

*The challenge then is to ask ourselves: How do I love now, given all this hatred? What does love call me to now in this bitter situation? Where can I now find a common thread that can keep me in family with those at whom I'm angry? How do I reach through, reach through the space that now leaves me separated by my own justified feelings of anger?*

And, perhaps most important of all: *"From where can I now find the strength to not give into hatred and self-serving indignation?"*

How am I called to love now? How do I love in this new situation? That's the challenge.

We've never before been called upon to love in a situation like this. Our understanding, empathy, forgiveness, and love have never before been tested in this way.

But that's the ultimate moral challenge, the "test" that Jesus himself faced in Gethsemane. How do you love when everything around you invites you to the opposite?

Almost all of our natural instincts militate against this kind of empathy, as does most everything around us. In the face of injustice our natural instincts spontaneously begin, one by one, to shut the doors of trust and make us judgmental. They also invite us to feel indignation and hatred.

Now those feelings do produce a certain catharsis in us. It feels good.

But that kind of cathartic feeling is a drug that doesn't do much for us long range. We need something beyond feelings of bitterness and hatred for our long range health. Empathy is that something.

While not denying what's wrong, nor denying the need to be prophetic in the face of all that's wrong, empathy still calls us to a post-anger, a post-indignation, and a post-hatred. Jesus modeled that for us and today it's singularly the most needed thing in our society, our churches, and our families.