

Goodbye to the Money Changers

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John 2: 13-22

This Sunday began about like any Sunday. I arrived at the church a little early for my weekly Bible study, parked the car, gathered up my calendar, sermon, books and headed into church. But as I got close to the doors of the sanctuary, it was clear that things were not quite right. Inside, there was some commotion on the other side of the door, loud voices, the clamor and clatter of things falling over. I heard a voice – might have been the head usher – “Hey, who do you think you are? What are you doing? You can’t do that!”

I approached the door but had to duck as the door opened and our brass candlesticks and candelabra came flying out. Then came the drum set, the beautiful clavinova. Please, don’t touch the handbells, they’re playing today! I was shocked to see our office computers come flying out the door...our newsletters, bulletins, addresses, phone numbers and financial records...now a pile of junk on the sidewalk. Then came the banners and the hymnals and my robes and stoles. How did he get into my office? Next came my ordination certificate, my goodness, there goes my Citizen of the Year certificate. Please, whatever you do, don’t tear up my Green Bay Packer stock certificate! Then the offering plates...Now, this guy was getting on my nerves. Next thing I knew, the plans for our new building, which we had put in the office, were unceremoniously crumpled up and thrown outside as well. What was going on? When I reached down and picked up a Bible, yes he threw out the pew Bibles as well, what should I find but our text for today – the second chapter of the gospel of John.

The Passover was near and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, doves, moneychangers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my father’s house a marketplace!” The Jewish authorities said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” He answered, “Destroy this temple! In three days I’ll raise it up.” They said, “This temple has been under construction for 46 years. You’re going to raise it up in 3 days?” They were literalists, for sure. But, he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said and they believed the scriptures and the words that Jesus had spoken. It’s interesting that John puts this text at the beginning of his gospel, while the other three have it at the end. It’s holy week. I wonder why John does that?

Noted preacher and New Testament scholar, Fred Craddock, says this actually happened. In his words, “I went to the dedication service of a beautiful building at the University of Oklahoma. It had a tall tower, great facilities, all kinds of marvelous things. A young man, the campus minister, had been asked to give a prayer. This was his prayer: “O Lord, burn down this building and scatter these people for the sake of the gospel. Amen” Craddock doesn’t tell us if that chaplain still had a job the next day. But I wonder, in doing what he did in the Temple, could an angry Jesus be making the same point as that young chaplain?

You know, I spend a fair amount of time each Sunday afternoon, even during football season, thinking about, reflecting on, and yes, fretting about, that morning’s worship service and usually yes, the sermon. Last week, in the afternoon, I fretted a lot. It was such a serious text, as you’ll recall - taking up our cross, losing life to find life. Jesus, for the first time, announcing his impending suffering and death. There aren’t a lot of funny stories you can tell about that kind of stuff. And I wondered, was the sermon too serious, was it just too much of a downer.? What fun, let’s go to church today and get verbally beaten up by the pastor. But that was last week. We’re done with that. Where should we go next? Oh, I know, why don’t we go to the temple in Jerusalem where we’ll meet a wild and crazy Jesus who walks in and starts tearing everything apart. Not exactly a feel good story, especially, I suppose, if you are on the Temple’s board of Trustees. These Lenten texts are relentless. They have a way, as Jesus did, of forcing us to think seriously about our faith, our discipleship, our church.

We’re getting closer to Jerusalem and Holy Week. This is no time, as the texts seem to be suggesting, for frivolous small talk. Something important is happening here. Something serious. Something we just might just be asked to stake our very lives on. Let’s get back to our text. How do you like this Jesus? Angry, a bit out of control. Rather unpredictable and edgy. He’s even carrying a whip in his hand and using it in a house of God. You know, I have to tell you that I love it when he attacks the Pharisees and the Romans, the rich and the unjust. Go get ‘em Jesus! ! But today, he’s on my turf. He’s messing with my stuff and isn’t showing the place I love very much respect. What are we going to do with this text...with this troublemaker from Nazareth?

In 2002, Bob Riley, a Republican member of Congress, was elected governor of the state of Alabama, a state where 90 percent of the residents identify themselves as Christians. Riley’s conservative credentials were air tight. Indeed, right wing kingmaker, Grover Norquist, gave Riley a “Friend of the Taxpayer” award every year he was in Congress, which is to say Riley never voted for any tax increase.

But when he became governor, Riley found himself administering a tax code dated back to 1901. A tax code which meant the richest people in Alabama paid three percent of their income in taxes, while the poorest paid up to twelve percent. And this tax rate kicked in if a family of four earned the

huge sum of \$4600 per year. (even in Mississippi, that hot bed of liberalism, the tax threshold was \$19,000 a year). So Riley shocked everyone by proposing a tax increase, partly to dig the state out of a fiscal crisis, partly to put more money into the state's school system which ranked as one of the worst in the nation and partly, to care for the poor. Riley, a conservative, evangelical Christian, argued that it was our Christian duty to look after the poor in Alabama more compassionately.

Had the new law passed, the owner of a \$250,000 home in Montgomery would have paid a yearly property tax bill of \$1432. But it didn't pass. Sixty-eight percent of the state voted against it. And the opposition was led, not only by the state's wealthiest interests, but also by the Christian Coalition of Alabama. John Giles, the group's president, said, "You'll find most Alabamians have got a charitable heart. They just don't want it coming out of their pockets." His website insisted that increasing taxes for the wealthy was nothing less than, "punishing success". Said Governor Riley, after the election, "I'm tired of Alabama being first in things that are bad and last in things that are good."

All right, I know, a blatantly political illustration. Sorry. Couldn't resist. But what does it have to do with our text? Maybe nothing! But maybe this...people of faith and their institutions, like all people and institutions, can become so enamored with the things of the world, the values of the world, that we lose sight of what matters most. I remember once when we decided to re-paint an old chest of drawers. We needed the drawer space and this chest had been sitting in the garage, unused, for a long time. It was covered with about 25 coats or so of paint. So we decided to sand it down and repaint it, because it really wasn't in bad shape. Well, when we finally cleaned off all the paint and reached the bare wood, we noticed how beautiful it was, the natural wood just as God created it. We decided to forget the paint, we liked it just the way it was. Put a little finish on it and we were done. We just cleaned off all the excess crud and got it down to the basics.

Could that be Jesus' message to the church? How easy it is, how tempting it is, to put ourselves and our institutions at the service of powers that are decidedly less than God. For example, how easy it becomes to see everything, including human need, through the lens of the market economy instead of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And so, setting aside resources for children, the elderly and the poor becomes "punishing success," while Jesus becomes the Lord of success and prosperity. I recall some words of Charles Lamb. As he gazed upon Robert Haydon's massive painting of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he said, "The face of Jesus looks remarkably like Robert Haydon." How tempting it is to make our portrait of Christ look suspiciously like ourselves."

But then the real Jesus, the passionate Jesus, the turn-the-world-upside down Jesus shows up on Sunday, looks around at all our stuff, our order of worship, the minister in robe and stoles, and gets angry. Jesus walks in and sees a Temple dedicated to the status quo, a monument to conventional wisdom and safe religion, and he gets angry.

Now, the day Jesus showed up there was nothing unusual going on in the Temple that day. It was very much business as usual. The changing of money – coins with the emperor's image could not be used for temple offerings – and the selling of animals for sacrifices - all common, everyday stuff. But John wants us to see, in the very beginning of his Gospel, that when Jesus comes around, it is no longer business as usual. He wants to clean away the excess crud, strip away all that layers that get between us and God, even if it means provoking and angering the powers that be.

He dares to tell us, your rituals, your orders of worship, your traditions, your organs and handbells and buildings mean nothing if they are simply servants of the status quo, if they are not instruments of God's mercy and justice and peace. Worship is not a substitute for justice. What good is any of this if people are not being changed, if they are not seeing the world with new eyes. A petty, polite domestication of the good news of the Gospel simply will not do. If you are not passing from death to life, if you are not passing from your enslavement to whatever masters bind you and on to the transforming and liberating worship of the living God, then what good is all this?

It is another tough, tough Lenten text. Probably won't put this one in the brochure either. It's tough as the consuming fire of Jesus' passion intrudes on our easy complacency.

Now I am sure, at least I hope, that I have a lot of comforting, reassuring sermons still in my heart, but Jesus says, not today. Today let's get serious about the kind of church, the kind of disciples I want and the world needs.

At the retirement dinner for a much beloved and respected pastor, after everyone had offered tributes to this man and his wonderful ministry, he rose to speak in response. His first words were, "I want to thank Jesus Christ for making me into the person I am. For without Jesus, I might have been normal." At which point Jesus stops overturning tables and tossing out candlesticks and says, "Yes, now that's what I'm talking about. Let me take your normal and ordinary little lives and turn them into high adventure. Dare to be as abnormal as I am"