

# The Unexpected Jesus: There Goes the Status Quo

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## John 2:13-22

Those of you were a little late last week missed the uproar. I got here early. Both the front doors to the sanctuary were wide open and I could hear a raised voice inside. It was our custodian, Keith. And there was other noise – clatter and clamor and things crashing. Keith was yelling, “Who do you think you are? Put those down. They aren’t yours. Don’t you dare...?” I was horrified to see our two beautiful brass candlesticks come flying out the door and crashing to the sidewalk. Then came the big pulpit Bible, lovingly donated by a church family as a memorial years ago, now flying through the air like a football. What kind of raving lunatic would throw around the Word of God? Then came a number of hymnals and...what is that? I ducked just in time to avoid being nailed on the head by two communion chalices, followed closely by the baptismal font and a number of flower vases. And then, please, not those, out came the offering plates. Somebody please call the police! Who is in there?

Then I heard Keith telling the intruder to get out of the office. But soon here it came, flying out the office window... the almighty and sacred church computer, followed closely by the copier and printer, splintering into a hundred pieces on the sidewalk. Then came the entire church sound system and the holy of holies... my wireless microphone. Now this guy, whoever he was, was getting personal. Finally Keith came out, clothes torn, cuts and bruises on his face and hands. “Who is in there?” I cried. “You aren’t going to believe this, Keith said, but it’s Jesus. He’s in there cleaning house.” “Jesus?” I asked. “My Jesus? Jesus meek and mild, who holds children and forgives sins and is always our best and most loyal friend? Jesus is in there turning everything upside down?” What is going on?

That day in the temple in Jerusalem was like any other day. Nothing unusual. There were always animals available for sale in the outer courtyard. These animals were ritually pure, animals to be used by people in making their sacrifices to God. They were needed for proper worship. And the money changers? They were needed as well. Everyday coins had imprinted on them the image of the emperor. Such coins could not be used for Temple offerings where such images were forbidden. Remember the emperor was viewed as a god, which was abhorrent to the Jews. So the money changers, for a small fee, changed Romans coins for coins with no such images, again a necessary activity both for worship life and the financial support of the Temple. This is what people expected; this is what people wanted. These vendors and money-changers were serving the worship and economic life of the temple. This is the way we have always done things around here.

But then Jesus shows up and what does he do? He cleans house. Indeed, he goes slightly crazy. He makes a whip – yes a whip. He kicks over tables, destroys the birdcages, stampedes the cows, dumps out the cash drawers of the money-changers and drives them all out. “Stop making my Father’s house into a Mega Mall!” he screams as he pops the whip on their backsides. I can’t recall ever seeing Jesus quite this angry. Why is he so upset?

Fred Craddock shares this story: “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. The campus minister, a young man, had been asked to deliver a prayer of dedication for this marvelous new building. It was a very brief prayer: “Lord burn down this building and scatter these people for the sake of the gospel.” One wonders how much longer he was the campus minister. I wonder if Jesus would have prayed the same prayer at the temple in Jerusalem? Would he pray it in this church?

Talk about bad timing, after all these years you would think I’d know better. Here we just sent you a letter extolling the virtues of our still fairly new Pilgrim Center next door and inviting you all to make a financial commitment to paying off the loan, which at \$350,000 is not a huge amount for such a beautiful and practical space. You have just received the letter and pledge card, then come to worship and hear this text – Jesus’ angry attack on the Temple, on a large and beautiful house of worship. Do you suppose he would make a pledge to our building?

Just what is he so upset about anyway? First it could very well be the nature of institutions. The last couple of weeks, when our office manager, Karin, was out of the office for several days, highlighted for me all it takes just to maintain this place, to keep it running, and this is by no means a giant church. I

have been absorbed with institutional maintenance. Thank God for office volunteers. But how easily just keeping a church going can take precedence over the church's ministry. Perhaps that was Jesus' protest against the temple. Turned in on itself, absorbed with budgets and buildings, it seemed concerned only for its survival to the exclusion of the many human needs and hurts just outside its doors. We can get so absorbed in day to day operations, that we miss the big picture, lose sight of who we are called to be. I think of the French proverb: "He who is near the church is often far from God." A bit harsh, perhaps, but something to think about. So yes, this could be what Jesus was angry about – institutional maintenance to the exclusion of all else. Or was it something even deeper?

Let's not forget who was in charge of things in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. The high priest in the Temple served at the pleasure of Rome. He got out of line, he was out of a job, and perhaps more than that. The Temple was also supported and essentially controlled by the Jerusalem elites – those with wealth and power. They, along with the Romans, made sure the priests toed the party line, did not make waves, preserved the status quo. What Jesus does in the temple is launch a prophetic protest against this state of affairs, against a temple hierarchy that was complicit in a domination system of economic exploitation, exclusion and inequality, a system that kept most of the population in desperate poverty. The purpose of the temple, Jesus insisted, was universal. It was not the private possession of any one group serving that group's narrow self-interest. And so Jesus initiates a symbolic destruction of the Temple, by stopping, for a day, its fiscal, sacrificial and liturgical operations. His words and actions indicate that, as far as he is concerned, the time has come for the temple and all who run it to be replaced – with a renewed heart, with love of God and neighbor, with care for the hurting and sick and oppressed, i.e. to be replaced with him, and the redemption and liberation he brings from every force that exploits or maims human life.

Reflecting on this text, William Willimon says, "Do you get it? Who is the temple now? There is now a new way to God. Jesus is consumed with passion for God's house, so he will purify God's house, transform our church into his very body, take a whip and drive out the idolatry in us, dust us off, clean us up, until we shine like the sun and are able to worship God in word and deed, on Sunday and on Monday as we ought."

I never thought in a million years that in my ministry here I would witness and participate in, not one, but two major building projects. Some of you may be thinking, "Now he tells us!" And I am proud of what we have accomplished. But if we stop there, with nice buildings, then perhaps Jesus should come after us with a whip. Ah, but what if through the pattern of prayer and praise we follow here on Sunday morning, through baptism and communion, and education and youth groups and even coffee and sharing after church, and all the various activities that are enabled by these buildings, what if God chooses to use these very human activities to come close to us; what if we were to experience, through our time here, God moving in us and among us?

I am reminded of some challenging words spoken by Annie Dillard: "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke on Sunday mornings? Or does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT. It is madness to wear ladies straw hats or velvet hats to church. We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews for the sleeping god may wake some day, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

That's what Jesus was doing in the temple, what he is doing in this sanctuary today – get out your crash helmets. He is drawing us out, calling us from a limited identity to a larger identity, from a limited self to a larger self, inviting us to become passionate about God's passion – the life of compassion and justice in the world, nourishing us even as he stretches us and leads us toward a vision of life very different from that of the world around us.

And when that happens, when Christ he gets ahold of us and draws us out, that's the magic, that's the hope. Because then this place is more than a group of buildings that require maintenance and upkeep. It becomes the real physical bridge through which we are connected to God and each other; this place, the church, becomes the bodily form Christ takes – the physical, earthly, human means whereby we are able to connect with God, learning to love what God loves and truly becoming new persons through the ongoing practice of loving God and each other. Now that's church...may God make it so.