

Again & Again: We Are Shown the Way

A call to action and reflective contemplation.

Third Sunday in Lent

John 2:13-22
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
March 7, 2021

On Thursday, March 18th, about 1 ½ weeks from now, our Celtic Circle group will be gathering (on zoom video, of course) for a new program to recognize the spring equinox. A vernal equinox happens twice a year, once marking the beginning of spring, and another marking the beginning of autumn. This occurs when the Sun is exactly above the equator and day and night are of equal length. There's more astronomy to it than that, but I'll leave it there. **At the equinox, day and night find themselves in perfect balance. The topic of finding balance in life, therefore, will be the theme of our Celtic Circle gathering.** All are invited. You can find the zoom video link in the church Newsletter which was emailed a few days ago. Mark Miller is our very capable facilitator.

Finding balance in a life of faith is of great importance to our spiritual health and well-being, and was modeled by Jesus himself. All four gospels record stories when Jesus engaged both in times of active ministry and in times of withdrawal for prayer, reflective contemplation, and renewal. This balance is also modeled and promoted by a favorite author and spiritual leader Richard Rohr. In fact, the organization he founded, which emails a remarkable Daily Meditation which many of us read, is entitled the Center for Action and Contemplation. Yes, the spiritual life is to be a balanced mixture of both.

As you know, we are in the liturgical season of Lent, a time intentionally shifted to the reflective contemplation side of the spiritual life. It is quite interesting indeed, then, that the assigned lectionary Gospel reading for this third Sunday in Lent is the story that finds Jesus at his most active – the Cleansing of the Temple. The story itself is fairly straightforward. When the celebration of Passover was near, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem, enters the temple compound, reacts to the people selling cattle, sheep, and doves by making a whip of cords and driving them out, then overturns the tables of the money changers, sending their coins pouring out onto the ground.

This story appears in all four New Testament Gospels. While there are many similarities between them, there are also significant differences, especially in John. Perhaps the foremost difference is that Matthew, Mark, and Luke (together called the Synoptic Gospels), place this event near the very end of Jesus' life, after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem that we refer to as Palm Sunday. For these authors, it is a pivotal event that leads directly to Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

This story is placed by the gospel writer of John, however, near the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Notice that it's found in chapter 2. Believing that this event didn't happen twice, it became evident to biblical scholars that the *theological* significance of John's placement is therefore more important to him than *chronological* precision. Arguments, therefore, about when it really happened, at the beginning or the end of

Jesus' ministry, misses the point that each of the gospel writers is trying to make. So much for biblical literalism.

In the hands of the author of the Gospel of John, the story of the Cleansing of the Temple highlights that right from the very *start* of Jesus' public ministry the abundant new life that he offers poses a challenge and threat to the existing religious and even political order. In other words, **the ways of Jesus represent an overturning of the status quo, of business-as-usual.**

This story is most commonly interpreted as an exemplary example of righteous anger and indignation. It is clearly meant to place Jesus squarely alongside the Hebrew prophets of old who lashed out at injustice, hypocrisy, and the improper worship of God. Therefore, **this story is an irresistible call to action, to take up our whips, metaphorically, and work to drive out injustices and abuses of power in our day and age.** So, what are the tables we are being called to overturn? I can think of many. I know you can, as well.

While that call to action resonates with those of us concerned with social justice, equity, and reform, we find upon closer scrutiny that it is not quite that simple – as biblical stories rarely are. So, let's take a closer look. Yes, we love to see ourselves in the role of Jesus, taking action to do what he does. **But what if we cast ourselves instead into the role of the money-changers, needing to have our tables overturned?** More on that in a moment. First, some necessary background information.

The historical setting for this story is the Jewish Feast of Passover, when the city of Jerusalem would have swelled to up to three times its normal population, causing all kinds of havoc and frantic activity. It's imperative to note that during Passover cattle, sheep, and doves (the sacrificial animal used by the poor) were *required* for burnt offerings in the Temple. Most of those making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem traveled a great distance and would not have brought animals with them. So, they needed to buy animals to sacrifice in order to participate in temple worship. Similarly, the temple tax could not be paid with Greek or Roman coins because they bore the image of the emperor's head – considered by the Jews to be idolatry. That money, therefore, had to be exchanged for temple currency. So, ironically, this picture of a wild open-air market was, in fact, a necessary practice for the proper functioning of the temple system.

While abuses of this system were inevitable, these practices simply reflect a reality of Judaic temple worship in Jesus' day. Some biblical scholars have offered, therefore, that **Jesus' protest wasn't so much about the practice itself, and certainly not an attempt to overthrow or replace the temple system itself. That would be an anti-Semitic interpretation of this story,** a mistake made by many Christians, including myself in the past. Instead, perhaps the issue is *where* it was taking place – in the outer court of the temple, near the Holy of Holies that represented the very presence of God on earth.

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), then state that Jesus says, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a *den of thieves*." This is not the charge in John. He reports that Jesus says, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a *marketplace!*" There's a big difference between a den of thieves and a marketplace.

As always, it's important to ask what any of this has to do with us today. Within established Christianity, perhaps this story could be approached as a parallel to, **"The Cleansing of the Church."** So, in addition to approaching this story simply as a call for us to engage our righteous anger on addressing issues of injustice and oppression, as important as that is, **what if this text also pushes us to imagine Jesus entering our own sanctuaries, overturning our own cherished rationalizations, doctrines, and practices, our upholding of the status quo, and perhaps even driving out some of what we think and do in the name of**

God? Has Western Christianity, somewhat like the temple system before it, settled into comfortable behaviors that enable it to simply meet institutional goals, turning an increasingly blind eye to the possibilities of corruption inherent in the religious system itself? That was certainly a major part of what led to the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. Perhaps worse, **how has Christianity in our country today turned the business of church into a marketplace?** Has the church become commercialized and a place where we simply take care of religious business, centering on the things we routinely *do* each Sunday, rather than primarily centering on God who is present with and within us, renewing and empowering us to live life fully, abundantly, and lovingly?

How is God challenging the status quo of business-as-usual in the institution of the church today? What tables of ours need to be overturned? What assumptions, beliefs, and practices of ours need to be upended? As Gail O'Day writes in the New Interpreter's Bible commentary:

Jesus challenges [the status quo and] a religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God, a temptation that exists for contemporary Christianity as well as for the Judaism of Jesus' day.

Christian faith communities [including our own] must be willing to ask where and when the status quo of religious practices and institutions has been absolutized and, therefore, closed to the possibility of reformation, change, and renewal.

The great danger is that the contemporary church, like the leaders of the religious establishment in the Gospel of John, will fall into the trap of equating the authority of its own institutions with the presence of God.

We too, therefore, are being challenged to take a close look at how we not only function, but also at our very purpose for existence as a community of faith. This past year of physical separation, necessitated for safety reasons due to the Covid-19 pandemic, is rightfully leading many of us to **rethink just how we do church, and just what the church is intended to be in the first place.** It has reenergized the focus of the new reformation that many believe the church was entering even before the pandemic. It's certainly more obvious now, if it wasn't before, that **church exists beyond the four walls of this or any sanctuary.** For in part, it has been present in our own homes as we worship separately each week, and yet are still able to sense connectedness with each other, and with God, and hopefully with all creation.

Well, I have no firm answers yet. It's something we're discussing in the weekly video gathering of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery pastors. Also, **I am looking forward to exploring with you how we function and live together as a community of faith now and in the future.**

I guess, after all, this story is indeed very appropriate for the season of Lent, in that it is about finding balance; **a call to reflective contemplation and a call to take action.** Again and again, Jesus is showing us the way.

Amen.

Resources:

Feasting on the Word
New Interpreter's Bible