

*Making Some Good Trouble*

Lent 3B

PPC

7 March 2021

Psalm 19

John 2:13-22

Here is an unforgettable image of Jesus: he is in a rage. His clenched fist, held high, holds the whip of cords that he has made. It wasn't something lying around that he picked up - it is a whip he has fashioned upon taking in the sight of the outer Temple at work. The whip comes down with stunning force, scattering tables, the coins, the sheep, the cattle, the doves; frightening them all. Worshippers who have made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival draw back in fear. I wonder what the disciples are feeling. What did they do while Jesus was throwing furniture, shouting at the top of his lungs, flinging money into the air? Did they look the other way, edging themselves toward the exit? Did they look at him the next morning or shuffle their feet, stare at the ground, and mumble something about the weather?

Worship in those agrarian times was all about sacrifice and appeasing God. Your hopes for a good crop and fertile fields were bound up in the sacrifices you made at the Temple. Worship was sacrifice and could only be done in the Jerusalem Temple; burnt offerings could only be made by priests. If a poll had been taken in those times, a great majority of people would have responded positively to the statement that their belief in universal piety and reverence for the Temple rituals was a good thing. People liked their worship ways.

Jesus' cleansing of the outer chambers of the Temple is powerful street theatre. He certainly gets people's attention. What is he so angry about? One commentator reflects that by overturning the tables, especially in John's Gospel, Jesus was

symbolically enacting an apocalyptic prophecy. The current Temple was soon to be destroyed (by the Romans in 70 CE) but Jesus' actions were symbolic of the Temple being destroyed not by an invading army but by God.

On the surface, it appears that Jesus doesn't want us to confuse God's space with retail space. It's a dicey move, though, for the money changers and merchants selling sacrificial animals were offering necessary services so that the worship and sacrifice could continue. Pilgrims from around the region had come to Jerusalem for the Passover. The major act of worship for them all was to purchase an animal that was within one's budget. These animals were given to the priests so that they could be sacrificed in the sanctuary, or inner court, of the Temple. This was a ritual that was highly prescribed in the Torah. It was much more convenient for these worshippers to make the needed purchases right there at the Temple rather than have to stop at the roadside Kwiki-Mart along the way. The coinage needed to purchase the animals could not be coins of the realm with the picture of Caesar on them. Hence, the need for the money changers.

Some commentators argue then, that, Jesus was not trying to destroy a long held rite that was important to worship. His distress is more about the methods and the unfair practices that were displayed as religious rites but actually were only surface piety. Jesus is protesting something more. John calls it a "sign" that points to who Jesus is.

One of the recurring motifs in this Gospel is that Jesus includes and transcends key symbols of Jewish faith and practice, turning tradition on its head. A word that John uses over and over is "sign" also translated as "miracle". "Now Jesus did many

other signs in the presence of the disciples...” writes John. “But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah” (John 20:30).

Since John tells this story about Jesus that takes place in the first of three years of his ministry, is he setting us up as the listeners and readers to come to view Jesus as the challenger to the status quo? This is the first of a succession of challenges Jesus makes to the whole system of authority, from Temple to Palace to Pilate’s Court. We wonder why he wasn’t arrested right then. Instead, he performs this “sign” which alerts the religious authorities to his teachings and the actions of this poor peasant from Nazareth.

It’s easy, really, for us hearing this story today to assume a righteous attitude. We identify with the good guy, Jesus. We look down on the villains of the piece, the religious authorities, the money changers, and the merchants. Consider this, though: what if the people that Jesus drove from the Temple that day are the very same people he came to save? The people who mocked him are the same people for whom he would lay down his life. They are the sinners he loves. We are the sinners he loves. Often it’s so much harder to discipline those we love more than those we don’t know. These merchants and money-changers are no different from us...perhaps especially when they mock him with indifferent lip-service and call it prayer...especially when we live self-centered lives and call ourselves Christians. Jesus was not deceived by the faux piety of the money changers. He saw through them as he sees through us.

At the Temple, the atmosphere is entirely devoted to ritual observances. Hosea’s words are a memory. “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of

God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6). Add singing and proclaiming and saying Amen to the sacrifices and you might be describing a contemporary worship service.

Do we practice our religion for external reasons? Do we ever experience transformation so that our hearts direct our feet to marching for justice and peace? Are we, in the words of John Lewis, “stirring up some good trouble?”. What would we have done and where would we be in those outer courts of the Temple as Jesus spoke up quite loudly for God’s word to be heard? I think of John Lewis as I read this story as along with other Civil Rights leaders he crossed the Edmund Pettis bridge. On this day, 7 March 1965, Jesus led that group across the bridge as they overturned the tables of the rituals of Jim Crow laws. They put their bodies on the line as state troopers beat people and wouldn’t let them cross. Bloody Sunday, as it has come to be known, was an act of making good trouble. What sign do we see in those actions of 56 years ago? What tables still need to be overturned?

Jesus came to challenge mere external ritualism which shows up as hypocrisy when it bears no resemblance to inner motivations and does not change the heart. “External religion will always be compulsively obsessed with Privilege, Prestige, Power, Politics, Protocol and Precedent. These are the tables and scales which Jesus overturns. For Jesus the heart is the holy of holies. The heart is the core of religion from which all thoughts, words, and actions overflow.”

Lent is the time in the church calendar when we reflect and meditate on what it means to apply the label “Christian” on our lapels. We are called to do some serious spring-cleaning. What are the things that keep us from fully loving? What are the actions that we can take to help bring about the changes needed so desperately in our

nation, our state, our city, today? As we examine what it is that motivates us, we must consider what the intersection of faith and life looks like for us. Here, we find that all creation is Holy Space.

It's good to tackle our own spiritual inventory. As church attendees we are called upon to answer the question that Jesus asks of us all, "Who do you say I am?" Do we put Jesus at the center of our lives? Remembering that Jesus doesn't want empty words or a fake piety. Most times, our actions speak louder than our words. "Preach the gospel always," wrote St. Francis, "and when you must, use words."

The cleansing of the Temple is a stark warning against a sense of false security against those tidy little boxes we create so that we can keep Jesus safely confined. We're more comfortable that way. Jesus, though, comes to awaken our hearts to what's really important in life. He comes to challenge our prejudices and illusions. He comes to deconstruct our religion which makes us feel safe and cozy. He never once says, "Understand me". No, he asks for something far more radical when he says, "Follow me".

How we do that will certainly determine our future. So, let's get busy and do some genuine spring cleaning.

AMEN.