

Do Better.
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John 2:13-22

Well. Would you look at that. Jesus is human after all. In a rare display of rage after entering the Temple complex, "...he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. 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!'" (John 2:14-16, NRSV)

It's a downright chaotic scene, and one that would likely, in our day, result in multiple 911 calls, a hefty police response, and Jesus getting carted off to jail and maybe put on a 72-hour psych hold. Anger, and the righteous indignation which very much accompanies it in this case, are fantastic motivators when channeled constructively. But, by the same turn, wrecking what had effectively become a religious marketplace, isn't exactly a great idea. Even so, we're left with the impression that this market isn't necessarily operating with the best of intentions. Maybe that's what Jesus is so upset about. Maybe he saw a merchant overcharging out of town visitors for a sheep, or for changing their Roman denarii into Temple shekels. Or maybe his point is that there is so much of a focus on commerce that they can't possibly have enough attention left over to give much to God.

Setting aside this issue of focus for a minute, one of the striking things about this scene is just how out of character this behavior is for Jesus. John portrays Jesus as this ethereal, almost otherworldly sort of character, and doesn't always make him seem like

a normal guy. We sometimes forget he's fully human as well as fully God, and so he has those big feelings about how, say, strangers react when they recognize who he really is, when his disciples fail to recognize what's right in front of them, when his friend Lazarus dies, or, in this case, when people are doing something Jesus finds deeply offensive.

This event occurs in all four gospels, and is described with nearly identical language. Scholars interpret quadruple overlapping like this as a strong indicator that a particular event it probably happened more or less as it's described. John's version differs from Matthew, Mark, and Luke in two major ways:

One, it's relatively early on in the storyline. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all place it just a couple of days before the Crucifixion, and it as the absolute last straw for the authorities in their decision to have Jesus killed. John also uses it to set up that last conflict, but by having it at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, it makes clear that the authorities' distaste for Jesus is not new. In a way, it also makes it easier for them to justify his arrest. It gives them license to remind each other that "Remember, he did THAT when he was here before – what makes you think he won't try it again, or do something worse, or something worse, if we don't take action?"

The second difference is that John leaves out Jesus calling the money changers and bird salesmen "robbers" or "bandits." Mark, Matthew, and Luke all have him quoting from the prophet Jeremiah as he expresses his displeasure about what's going on in the Temple courtyards: "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers" (Mk 11:17, NRSV) John is a bit gentler, stating only that "his disciples remembered that it was written, 'zeal for your house will consume me'" (Jn 2:17). It's certainly less provocative, while at the same time

making Jesus' motivations clear. he wants this place to be one where people can freely encounter God, without having to pay for the privilege in some way. He is also announcing the start of a new era, "... one in which the grace of God is no longer mediated or accessed through cultic sacrifice, but instead is available to all who receive Jesus as God's Messiah."¹

Leaving aside some of the heady theological issues this passage raises, there is a very practical consideration at work. The worship of God has been pushed aside by humans living into their tendency to lose track of what's important and what isn't. It's not a new concept. There are numerous accusations in the Hebrew Scriptures which are leveled against the people who fail to go along with the insistence about Jerusalem/the Temple being the only proper venue to encounter God. Those almost always start with the statement that some leader has done what was evil in the sight of the LORD by moving worship sites away from Jerusalem. And then, to make matters worse, they ignore God altogether, which in turn causes God to express God's displeasure in ways ranging from prophetic tongue lashing to the outright destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of its enemies. The people, for their part, repent and do what is necessary to restore right relationship with God and one another... that is, until next time.

The cycle of human apathy, followed by divine punishment, followed by repentance and forgiveness, is definitely not what is at work in this specific instance. However, Jesus' pointed critique is just as valid as the ones his prophetic ancestors leveled. The Temple, rebuilt some 500 years before Jesus' birth, was very much the central hub of Jewish life at that time. But, instead of being a place dedicated to

¹ David Lose, "Lent 3B: Igniting Centrifugal Force." <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/03/lent-3-b-igniting-centrifugal-force/> [accessed February 26, 2024].

encountering God, the grounds have been transformed into an open-air marketplace. Even if the commerce wasn't essential to the Temple's central functioning – remember, animal sacrifices were very much a part of some Jewish observances, and the "Temple tax" could not be paid with Roman money – it may well have been transformed into a for-profit endeavor by the time Jesus shows up there. And if the people running it are actively taking advantage of the pilgrims who've come there (which John leaves us to imagine might be the case), it's just that much worse. So Jesus challenges them, as he almost always does when he encounters the religious leadership: *do better*.

Do better. Those words cut like a knife, even now. They call us to take a hard look at the *status quo*, and to re-set our expectations of "church", and maybe even our own behavior, to be more in line with the ones Jesus himself tried so hard to teach. As John makes clear here, those expectations start with centering worship on *him*, and not on the stuff that we think we need in order to do so. They end with living into the commandment to love one another, which is neatly encapsulated in the 5th question of the Baptismal Covenant: "Will you strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of all human beings?"

The Church, as a body made up of humans, hasn't always done well at this. Historically speaking, it's been just as interested in wielding political power and influence as the most ruthless politician. That's still true in some corners – if you Google "white Christian Nationalism," you will see that desire coming through in spades. Church communities continue to struggle with how to be places where all are truly able to be and to lead as their fully authentic selves. We aren't there, yet. So much of the conversation that's happening around our diocese, and at the national church level, right now

underscores this, painfully. They make clear we have not dealt fully with issues surrounding structural and institutional racism, and how we hold leaders accountable when they do harm. They have, and continue to cause damage not only to individuals like our bishop and her family, or victims of abuse who can't get justice – but to all of us. It impairs the relationships which are at the heart of what we do here. If we want to thrive, we have to do better – to let our zeal for this house, and our love for one another, inspire us to engage in the long and slow process of change.

That leaders in the Episcopal Church are working hard to pave the way for us to have the hard conversations around these issues is a start. That we are at least willing to try is important. It matters that this is a safe space for anyone who walks into this building. It matters that we keep working at it... because the kids who will inherit this place when we are gone; and the rest of the world, which is highly skeptical of the institutional Church right now, are watching. Do we want them to learn that church is a place where people are stuck in ways of thinking and believing that limits their ability to embrace the diversity of the world God created? Or do we want to model for them how to work together despite our differences? My vote is the latter... and may we be brave enough to see it through to the end, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us feel.