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Christ Our Anchor Presbyterian Church  
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John 2: 13-25

### “YOU DON’T GET TO DO THAT”

Last Sunday, we met Jesus at a wedding. Yes, when the wine started to run out, he had the servants fill six stone jars with water. And when they took a cup to the steward, what he tasted was not water, but wine. Jesus had turned water into wine so that the celebration could continue. But most of the guests didn’t notice.

Jesus was another guest at the wedding, sitting at his assigned table, eating, drinking, smiling, conversing, enjoying the festivities.

PLEASE BRING BACK THAT JESUS!! Or better yet, bring in the good shepherd with the lambs on his shoulder and the children clinging to his legs, or the sweet Jesus boy whose birth we just celebrated or the healing Jesus or the storyteller. Yeah, that would be fun.

But please tell this angry prophet Jesus to go back out to the parking lot and come in as another, more pleasant version of himself. Anything, but this angry enraged Jesus. COA friends, it’s only my second week with you, and you’ve handed me this Jesus?

I feel queasy!

And that’s exactly how our scripture text from John’s Gospel should make us feel.

This story is known as the cleansing of the temple, but it is not a scene of Windex and lemon oil. Jesus is not engaged in housekeeping, but a rampage. The cattle are loose. The doves are squawking, and the leaders are shrieking, “Who are you? You don’t get to do that.” And Jesus says, “No, you don’t get to do what you are doing?”

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, this story is placed at the end of Jesus’ ministry, when he has absolutely had it with the religious leaders. But in the Gospel of John, it’s like the public inauguration of Jesus ministry. What a way to begin!

What got into Jesus? Where do we start?

Let’s start with the temple.

Israel is under Roman occupation, but the Jewish people are allowed their worship and their religious practices. I have never lived in an occupied country so I don’t know what that would be like. I can imagine that those temple leaders were always looking over their shoulders and wanted to remain in the graces of the empire.

On this particular day, the pilgrims are coming to the temple from near and far for the Passover. They couldn't bring animals for sacrifice on their journey because all animals for sacrifice had to be unblemished, and that would be impossible to maintain on a rugged journey.

So, they had to buy the animals once they got to the temple. And they had had to pay a temple tax. So, the Finance Committee has set up their table along with the money changers who could change Roman coins into shekels. It really is a marketplace, and in a way out of necessity.

Now, the marketplace was set up in the only the area of the temple where Gentiles were allowed to enter. But with the space needed for business transactions, there was no where to put the visitors.

The Jewish leaders were running the temple, holding on to an institution as an occupied people knowing that the more money they exchanged, the more doves and sheep that were sold, the better the financial report would be, and they would be more secure in their relationship with Rome.

Jesus is coming to the temple as a Passover pilgrim, but when he looks around, he becomes an angry (very angry) prophet. What upset him was the marketplace, perhaps the knowledge of corruption that is often present when money is exchanged, perhaps that the place for visitors had been taken over, perhaps witnessing the exploitation of people who had traveled long and hard for the Passover.

But more than that, the temple was the sacred place for the Jewish people to come and worship, the structure in Jerusalem where God was located, the holy of holies, the very presence of God. The temple held the ark of the covenant which contained the **law** that defined the relationship between God and the people.

In the Psalms, we read, **"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul... more to be desired than gold, sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb."**

God had given these people this place, this choice gift, and they had taken it over with their own priorities.

The image of honey in the Old Testament is not used lightly. It does refer to that thick golden substance produced by bees, but the image also implies a choice gift- sweet, generous, and in abundance.

But God had become more of an afterthought. Temple life was blindsided by business and profit. The precious gift from God, the law, the relationship with God, more desired than gold, sweeter than honey and its drippings, was far from the first thing on their mind.

One year for his birthday, my husband received the gift of a beehive (not from me). So, I cleared a shelf for all the honey we would be producing, but the fact is that shelf stayed empty. But in those years, my husband obtained such great pleasure learning about beekeeping and being an active member of the Beekeepers Association forming good friendships. The shelf stayed empty, but I was happy that my daughters would follow their dad out to the hive and learn about a community where the leader was a queen.

One day, one of his fellow beekeepers came over and after attending the hive brought into the house a tiny jar of honey, "This is honey from your dad's hive." We proudly placed it on the waiting shelf, and it stayed for a long time because we only ate a drop at a time. When we had guests, the girls would take the jar off the shelf, "This is our honey from our hive. It's very valuable. Do you want a taste?" And the guest would get a drop of honey.

God gifts are more abundant than one jar of honey. God's gifts are dripping from the honeycomb. But very much like the temple leaders, how easily we can forget about the choice gifts that God has given to us, and why we are here in the first place. Other priorities can so easily take over.

The temple leaders did not throw Jesus out. They were willing to hear by what authority Jesus was engaging this rampage. If you have listened to Handel's "Messiah" you might remember that bass recitative that sings, "... and the Lord whom you seek shall **suddenly** come to the temple"

Those are words from the prophet, Malachi. The Jewish leaders would have known this prophecy and this angry Jesus **had** suddenly come to the temple.

But when Jesus talks about himself as God's temple and being destroyed and rebuilt in three days, the religious have no idea what he is saying..... or they didn't want to know what he was saying. In John's Gospel, among the religious leaders, skepticism grows quickly into hostility.

This was not a Lord they were expecting, one of their own makings, a cooperative Lord, a Lord affirming their power and practices.

This was someone who was turning over tables. That was threatening.

So, what is the takeaway from this morning's scripture test?

First of all:

The Church IS an institution along with everything that comes with institutional life; year-end financial reports (and it's wonderful when they are strong reports which reflect stewardship, generosity and integrity), annual meetings, committees, records, minutes, polity, policy, rehearsals, budgets. It's all part of running a church. .... and important that it's done well because everything we do is about honoring and serving God.

But institutional aspects can become so big and so time consuming that we bury the very foundation on which this institution is based; the choice gift that our generous and loving God has given us, the gift of God's son, Jesus.... more desired than gold, sweeter than honey, oh so precious and valuable.

But he will turn over tables.

And secondly,

The temple leaders did not understand or did not want to understand Jesus' words.

His message was that HE would be the temple. God's presence would not be limited to a building or a particular space. Jesus takes sacredness out into the world where God is present and at work in any time, in any place.

And this temple, this Jesus, would be destroyed but would rise again after three days.

The religious leaders could not or would not get out of their own mindset.

In all honesty, we can probably relate to that. We like to think what we think.

I gave us a community star word last week. It was the word "NOTICE" and I suggested that you look for God at work in small, unnoticed, subtle ways that change things in a big ways.

This week, I challenge you to take that star word and "NOTICE" the places in the world of January 16, 2022 where God's presence and work need to happen; those places into where we need to follow Jesus.

So, perhaps

When you see someone or some group intentionally excluded, when you see obvious signs of a system being manipulated to inhibit the marginalized to keep the powerful in place, take "NOTICE," and ask yourself, "Would Jesus be turning tables?"

When you are walking through a neighborhood and think, "Wow, these people should pick up their trash, but then you take "NOTICE" that trash cans are only placed one every six blocks. Where you live, they're on every block. Ask yourself, "Would Jesus be turning tables?"

This past week at the Environmental Rights Stakeholders Rally, we were reminded to take "NOTICE" in what communities is there a concentration of landfills, concrete companies and battery disposals being built and what communities are safely distanced from environmental hazards. "Would Jesus be turning tables?"

Martin Luther King, whose birthday we celebrate tomorrow said, "It's always the right time to do what's right?" It might not be easy or convenient or fit in with what's been working for us.

But just maybe we can be thankful for today's passage and the metaphorical question very relevant to our time:

"Would Jesus be turning tables..... because of what's going on here?"

You see, we are so skilled at our rationalizations. It is so easy for us to come to exist in a temple of our own construction where the Jesus we understand is one of our own makings. We are pals with Jesus.

Jesus is our Savior, so we tend to think that he is perpetually pleased with us.

Jesus is for us and with us and in us and loves us unconditionally, but in that love, there are times when Jesus also speaks TO us, and those words might be, "You don't get to do that."

So, as the church, by the power of the Holy Spirit, let us continue to strive to build a community that is pleasing to God, where Jesus doesn't have to come in and turn tables. Attention to institutional aspects and a well-run church is fine, but NOT if it ever buries the essence of why we are here in the first place.

And, let us also remember that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, so we reach beyond the wood and the stone, the physical structure of the building and the institution and carry to the world, the gift we have received, God's Son and all that he was about, sweeter than honey, more precious than gold.....

But when needed, never hesitant to turn tables.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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