**OUR TEMPLES**

**John 2:13-22**

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

 15 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.

 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"

 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

 20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?"

 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

**SERMON**

This passage always leaves me with my head spinning. It does not fit with the Jesus that we so desperately want to hold on to. Most of us, in our minds, like to keep an image of Jesus the peacemaker, the gentle teacher who loved and forgave and shared Good News and welcomed the children… A Jesus who meekly went to the cross to die for us, without fighting it. But here, the newly-called disciples and we get a glimpse of an angry, unyielding Jesus who speaks truth to power from the onset of his mission. I wonder if the whip-of-cords, table-turning Jesus frightened or thrilled the disciples?

And yet, something within me wants to cheer him on: “Yay, Jesus… You tell them, you show them, you stand up in this rotten world once and for all.” Many of us see this as justification for righteous indignation and anger in a world where things drive us to the edge so many times.

So, what was going on in the temple in Jerusalem to make Jesus become so unglued and behave so erratically? To understand, we’ll have to shoot back a couple thousand years. Let’s say you traveled to Jerusalem during the Passover, and with you, you brought an appropriate sacrifice to God, as prescribed in the Hebrew Scriptures. You brought a ram and two turtledoves to offer in the Temple. When you arrived at the Temple, a priest met you at the door to “inspect” your sacrifice – to make sure it was up to “code”. And yours was rejected - too old, or that they weren’t the right size, or that they had spots or blemishes. “But don’t worry,” the priest said, “we just happen to have our own hand-picked selection of sacrificial animals right over here.” Never mind the fact that the markup on rams and turtledoves for sale in the Temple was significant—you had two choices: leave, having done nothing according to the Scriptures, or pay through the nose and upgrade your offerings.

So, you get out your money to buy your replacement ram and turtledoves, but Caesar’s face is on the coin, and Roman coinage was not accepted there at the Temple. “But don’t worry,” the priest says. “We’re a one-stop shop! You can exchange those coins for our Temple currency right over here at the money changing tables!” Of course, there’s an exchange rate that goes with that. As church fundraisers go, this was a pretty lucrative scheme. And it kept out the poor and the “riffraff”; exactly those who Jesus liked to hang out with.

Jesus shows up and he can barely stand the thought of the Temple being used in this way. He loses it! He becomes unhinged, unmanageable! He grabs a cord and makes himself a big ol’ whip and starts cracking it, driving the animals out. He even approaches the moneychangers’ tables, whip still in hand, and starts dumping out their coins, all over the tables, rolling all over the floor. And then he does them one better—he just upends the tables themselves. Imagine the chaos that ensued, with the priests really getting worked up and angry. No wonder they ask him by what authority he is doing this.

Jesus exposed them for what they really were; for what was really more important. For the idol of mammon that they were worshipping; for the idol of religious rules – 613 of them, that became more important than just being in the holy presence of God, who made a covenant with his people to be their God.

I wonder what it would be like if Jesus were alive and walked our streets today—if Jesus had chosen our time and place to be in ministry in the world. Where would he go and what would he say? We would like to assume that Jesus would fit right in—that he’d be a likeable, approachable teacher, easily earning our love, respect, and admiration. The truth is, however, that things being the way they are and humans being human, we have labels for people like Jesus: agitator, radical, malcontent, troublemaker, propagandist… In this day and age, people like Jesus make headlines not for being kind or thoughtful or even for embodying the essence of God’s love and grace. No, people like Jesus make headlines for disturbing the peace.

In our world, where the rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer, where the average age of homelessness is 9, where we criminalize many of the symptoms of poverty without treating the disease of poverty, where racism still fuels separation between black and white and brown, and yet some of us still enjoy the peace afforded to us by our relative privilege. That’s not peace. It’s denial. And it must be disturbed. Sometimes the peace we think we have is a peace that demands disturbance. And the good news—sometimes the hard news—but the good news for you and I is that Jesus was a disturber of the peace. Jesus marched into the temple, a peaceful place that was not unlike many corners of the world, near and far, where peace depended heavily on the powerful setting the rules and the powerless asking no questions. Jesus marched into that temple with a whip in one hand and said, “We’re starting over here!”

We forget this about Jesus—that he didn’t care much about being liked, that he often preached at his own expense, that almost everything he did got him into hot water—the things he said, the company he kept, the lepers he touched, the prostitutes he welcomed, the tax collectors he ate with, the “work” he did on the Sabbath, the Samaritans he honored, and certainly the tables he crashed to the floor in the temple of all places… Just about everywhere he went, Jesus was a disturber of the peace…so much so, that it cost him his life. The “temple” that will be broken down and build back up in three days.

This is the same Jesus today, working in our churches, barging into temples of our own religious beliefs and tenets, our piety and superiority. This is the same Jesus today, entering our churches, where we have lulled ourselves into a lifelong religious trance, in which we somehow think we can be faithful to God without being faithful to the Way of Jesus Christ, and its Spirited lack of compromise when it comes to God’s compassion for the poor and outcast in society. Perhaps Methodist Bishop Will Willimon says it best. “In my experience, churches always hope that it is possible to be faithful to the mandates of Jesus Christ without the pain of disruption and dislocation.” But the thing is that Jesus Christ is a Disturber of the Peace.

This is the same Jesus who turned society upside down with a new way of doing things. Who cared for the poor and the sinner; who welcomed all into his circle. It is the same Jesus who told those who would listen to pray for your enemy, to love your neighbor, to turn the other cheek, to give away everything and follow him. It is the same Jesus who broke every rule in the book to show only the love of God for all God’s children; the one who came to fulfill the law to set us free. It is the same Jesus who told us last week to take up our cross and follow him; to lose our lives for his sake.

Perhaps this is the same Jesus who longs to enter the confines of the temple of your own heart and life; the heart and body which Paul calls a holy temple of the Holy Spirit in first Corinthians. During the journey of Lent, maybe it is time for us to look inside, where we feel like we’ve got things fairly well under control. What would Jesus drive out of your life? What tables would he overturn in your soul? Is there a “peace” in you that demands disturbance? How have we in our homes, in our communities, in our places of worship, in our lives together, cheapened the precious gifts of God? And as a result, where and why and how does God grieve?

Is it self-righteousness? Is it the selfishness which is part of the cultural values, so far from the vision of that generosity, fairness, and insuring a social safety? Is it self-indulgence; keeping for ourselves, not willing to share, when caring for the least of these is God’s demand, whether in economic or religious life. Is it pride, is it hurt, is it anger? Is it low self-esteem or self-doubt when God so fearfully and wonderfully made you?

I sometimes wonder if we, unknowingly, wanting to do what is right by the “laws and regulations” that we have learned since we were very young, exploit via exorbitant tithes and taxes that blocks access to the divine — that literally keeps the bodies of the poor outside the gates of the temple, forcing them into more and endless debt before they can approach and worship God.

When Jesus took on a human body – became truly human, he did so out of the love for all of our human bodies, everywhere. The “bodies of the hungry children and indentured women along with the bodies of sleek athletes and cigar-smoking tycoons,” as Barbara Brown Taylor names them in her book, an Altar in the World. Jesus, the true temple, did not stand by and let others get exploited, oppressed and abused. Jesus interrupted worship for the sake of justice.  He moved from compassion to righteous anger to decisive action, because he would not stand for the violation of sanctuary.  He would not tolerate blocked access to his Father's house.  He would not stomach any version of unfairness and cruelty towards the most vulnerable and beleaguered people in his society.

Let Lent be the season to let Jesus into our temples, hard as it may be, to overthrow which does not belong. To overthrow the tables and get rid of those things that is not the true self, the image of God; the things that keep us from being truly alive in Jesus Christ, who went all the way to the cross for us to have life, and that eternally.