

"Whip Cracking Mad"

John 2:13-22

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The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple 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!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 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.

Prayer.

The proximity of our Exodus passage
And our Gospel passage from John
Is close and deliberate.

In Exodus we hear the old, familiar recitation
First heard so long ago in our childhood or youth;
The Ten Commandments,
The Decalogue,
God's Law given to God's people.
The Ten Commandments are easy to ignore:
Due to their ancient context,
Their apparent obsolescence,
Their stone cold, selected use for some believers,
Their relatively narrow range of coverage,
Or for their remarkable ability
to make us each of us feel uncomfortable or inadequate.¹
Rarely do we capture some of the positive characteristics of the Law;
It's concern for the well-being of people,
It's concern for the preservation of life,

¹ Thanks to Terence E. Fretheim, Elva B. Lovell Professor of Old Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.

How it instructs us and guides us in developing wisdom and maturity,
How the Law promotes good.²
For the careful scholar or the curious seeker
It is possible to use these sacred texts to
Dive deeper into the world of theological inquiry,
To look up into the vast star-crowded night dome
With an open and receptive mind,
And invite the Spirit to come, and enter in.
It is possible to listen to the echo of the Ten Commandments:
Examining God's motives,
Discovering God's grace and compassion,
Revealing God's special interest: the vulnerable and marginalized.

The proximity of our Exodus passage
And our Gospel passage from John
Is close and deliberate.

Jesus walks into a den of Ten Commandment iniquity.
Leaving Cana, in Galilee, where he turned water into wine
To the astonishment of a thankful wedding party,
Jesus walks the 90 miles south,
Down the Jordan River valley,
Then up the serpentine road from Jericho
To the Temple crowned city of Zion.
He submerges in a Temple ritual bath
For the "purification of his body,"
Ascends three stories using one of two colossal stone staircases
And emerges from the covering porticos
Into a 17 acre courtyard
Crowded with people
Purchasing and holding live animals from some,
Changing Roman and foreign currency into Jewish currency from others.
Jesus would have also seen
Two long lines,
One for male Jews and one for female Jews,
In Disney-like queues,
Snaking their way to two separate entrances to the inner courts,
Where animals would be slaughtered and the Temple tax would be received.

When Jesus steps into the courtyard,
Sees and experiences all that is laid before him,
The hypocrisy of organized religion overwhelms him.

² Ibid.

His blood boils.
He becomes whip cracking mad.

You shall have no other gods before me.³
Yet the courtyard is filled with coin and currency
Upon which is stamped the likeness of some soon-to-be-forgotten,
Ego filled king, emperor, or tyrant.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.⁴
Yet the Temple authorities outrageously claim
That a dip in their bath is all that is required
To be made clean.

You shall not steal.⁵
From the fees for the bath,
To the vertical monopoly of the Temple selling sacrificial animals,
To the usury currency exchange rate;
Everything about the Temple system
Was theft –
Organized religion engaging in organized crime
Against its own people.
The Divine expression of goodness, grace, and compassion
Had been converted into a cesspool of sin.

Like Eric Devendorf's standing high jump onto the courtside official's table,
I can just imagine Jesus hopping onto an exchange trader's table
And screaming Superstar-esk,
"My Temple should be a house of prayer,
and not a den of thieves!"
kicking it over, even as he hops down,
And throwing over every other table he can quickly find.
Finally cornered, and with his disciples and the crowd surrounding him,
The Jewish authorities,
Supported by the quickly gathering brutal Roman soldiers
Streaming from the adjacent Antoni Fortress,
Ask, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"

Sometimes the meat of the Gospel is buried
Under one or two layers of intentionally symbolic language,
Obscured by tongue, time, and translations.

³ Exodus 20:3

⁴ Exodus 20:16

⁵ Exodus 20:15

Following Jesus turning water into wine in the preceding passage,
The Gospel of John reports to us that
His disciples "believed in him."⁶
Yet, now, a mere week or so later,
Surrounded by an angry mob of
Temple officials, Roman soldiers, and rubber necking Jews
Their newly professed belief was proving to be shallow, even untenable.⁷
What Jesus said, and how he said it
Right here, right now, in this tinderbox, tremendously explosive moment,
Has everything to do with
What his disciples believe now,
And going forward,
What we believe about Jesus even today.

The words Jesus chooses
Invites us to interpret and to remember.
"Take these things out of here!
Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"⁸
The prophet Zechariah proclaims,
"On that day ... there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts."⁹
And it is the Psalmist who speaks,
"It is the zeal for your house that has consumed me;
the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."¹⁰
By his actions, Jesus is staking his identity as a prophet;
By his words, however, Jesus is claiming to be our Father's Son.
The crowd is mystified.
A prophet, yet God's Son?
How could this be?

By the time of John,
Jesus had been raised from the dead
And the Temple had been destroyed.
"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."¹¹
Jesus tells the crowd.
"Is he the Temple instead;
The one God has sent to take the place of the Temple?"¹²

⁶ John 2:11

⁷ With thanks to Sarah Henrich, Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.

⁸ John 2:16

⁹ From Zechariah 14:20-21

¹⁰ Psalm 69:9

¹¹ John 2:19

The disciples have all this pondering still before them.
Christendom has centuries to work it out.
But for us, and with the luxury of hindsight,
We are assured by John's later day editors:
"He was speaking of the temple of his body ..."¹³
"... and they believed."¹⁴

The words we choose and the language we speak makes a difference.
Too often we fail to recognize the power of words or the depth of their meaning.
We casually refer to the Church as the "Body of Christ"
And, at most, think of the old Sunday school song
"The church is not a building,
the church is not a steeple,
the church is not a resting place,
the church is a people."¹⁵
The Body of Christ is so much more.
Jesus is the new Temple;
Not made of massive stones,
Which can be toppled just as easily as they were assembled.
Jesus is the new Temple;
The focus of our sacred worship,
The center of our spiritual universe,
The source of living water that quenches our deepest thirst.
The impurity, debauchery, and sin of the first Temple
Is replaced with the purity of Christ,
Sinless,
Selfless,
The Divine Sacrifice.
Jesus becomes himself
Substitution,
Atonement,
For your benefit, and mine.
In three days
Jesus is resurrected,
He ascends into heaven,
And each of his disciples are left with
The Sacrament:
"Take this bread, and drink this cup"
and by the Spirit's power and presence

¹² Henrich, S., Ibid.

¹³ John 2:21

¹⁴ John 2:22

¹⁵ Richard Avery and Donald Marsh, 1972.

we become Christ's body,
redeemed by his blood.

Dearly beloved,
As the Body of Christ,
Spirit filled disciples of Jesus,
God has shaped us as the new Temple.
We are not to be lured into the old ways of Temple commerce,
Built on hypocrisy and in violation of the good Laws God has given us.
Rather, we are to be cleansed ourselves,
People of worship, praise and thanks,
Living for God's will to be fulfilled,
Hopeful for the day of our judgment and salvation,
Believing in Jesus Christ,
Our Lord,
And our Savior.
Amen.