

March 15, 2009

Scripture: John 2: 13-22

Sermon: "Driven out of the Temple"

We continue our Lenten journey with a very familiar story, a story that shows the human side of Jesus. We know this story as "Jesus cleansing the Temple." All four gospels share their own version of this story. Matthew, Mark, and Luke put this incident during holy week and for the other Gospels, the cleansing of the Temple becomes one of the acts that really puts the Jewish religious leadership over the edge and they begin to make plans to have Jesus arrested.

Only John's gospel puts the incident of Jesus cleansing the Temple at the beginning of his ministry, as a way to begin his ministry for the people of God. This incident follows the story of the wedding at Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine, his first miracle in the Gospel of John.

So why did John follow up a miracle story with a story about cleansing the Temple? So why did John begin Jesus' public ministry with two seemingly extreme acts of ministry such as Turning a ridiculous amount of water into wine and then driving merchants and animals out of the temple. Doesn't seem like a great start for Jesus. People are going to start talking.

We were always told in seminary, "You don't make a lot of changes your first couple of years of ministry. Don't start shaking the boat too much your first year. You don't have the people's trust yet. You don't have the authority to change things at the beginning. You don't have a relationship yet with your congregation that will allow you to come in and start shaking things up that first year." I don't think Jesus got that memo.

His first acts of ministry start shaking things up right away. His first acts of ministry create some really big ripples. His first acts of ministry literally turn the tables on the establishment.

Jesus jumps right in and starts shaking things up and turning the tables on the people of God. And that is the point for the author of John. He wants his readers to understand that there is something different about Jesus. He wants his readers to understand that through Jesus, a new order has come about for the people of God. John wants his readers to understand that the arrival of Jesus in the world establishes a new relationship with God.

And that new relationship, that new order, that new understanding of who Jesus really is as the Son of God is going to turn the tables on the way things are done in our world. Jesus' ministry, Jesus' purpose is to show the people of God that we have gotten too caught up in the way things are always done, that we have gotten trapped in our religious practices, that we have become so invested in the "business" of the church, that we are unable to recognize the new life, the new beginning, the new revelations of God in our lives. And we have forgotten why we do the things we do in the first place.

We have forgotten that all of our practices, that all of our disciplines, that all of our missions, that all of our traditions are ways to deepen our relationship with God, not motions to simply go through as people of faith.

For John, the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple forces us as people of faith to ask ourselves the question of why we do the practices and traditions that we do in church? Do we do them to be in relationship with God and to live out our faith? Or do we do them simply because we have always done them and we honestly don't know why we do them?

For John, this story becomes a way for Jesus to literally turn the tables on us and set us free, free to see the new beginnings, the new order, the new relationship found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

John sets this story during the time of the Passover, one of the most sacred times for people of the Jewish faith. People from all over would travel to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast and make their way to the Temple to make offerings to God. And that is the background for this story of Jesus cleansing the Temple.

A whole system had evolved because people needed to make offerings to God. And the religious officials knew that people would not be traveling with "extra" sheep or cattle to give as sacrifices and would need to buy them somewhere. And the religious officials knew that people would have to exchange their Roman money for acceptable money to pay the Temple tax. You couldn't use money with images or faces on it to give to the Temple, because that would be idolatry and that would be breaking one of the commandments. So the officials set up a one stop shopping center: a place where you could purchase your "pure" animal to give as a sacrifice and a place to exchange your money.

The officials set up a way to run the "business of church."

And that is what Jesus objects to when he drives them out of the Temple. That is what Jesus objects to when he makes a whip of cords and drives the animals out of the Temple. That is what Jesus objects to when he turns the tables over and scatters the coins.

Jesus is angry that the practices of the church have become a business. Jesus is angry that the ministry of the church has become a ministry of trade. Jesus is angry that the House of God has become a market place.

The House of God is no longer a place where the people would come and celebrate the God who delivered them from Egypt, who freed them from bondage, who claimed them as God's own.

The House of God had become a place where people were simply going through the motions, where the people of God failed to understand the meaning behind their practices, where the people of God had become so "invested in the business of 'running the church' and making a success of it that [they] had missed God's commanding presence and insistent redemptive action among them."

God had come to them-The Word made Flesh- and they didn't see it. God had come to them, in human form, and they couldn't see the presence of God among them. God had come to them, The Word made Flesh, and the people of God were so trapped in the traditions and practices of

the church that they missed the new beginning, the new order, the new relationship found in Jesus Christ.

That is why Jesus turns the tables. That is why Jesus disrupts the business of the Temple. That is why Jesus drives the people out of the Temple.

Jesus wants them to open their eyes to the new beginning that is among them Jesus wants them to open their hearts to the presence of God once more. Jesus wants the people of God to recognize that God is doing new things in their midst.

“The Jesus who speaks ...from this text calls [the people of God] to enter anew into the presence of God who drives away the pretensions and conventions of our religious life and asks us to live inside and out of his death and resurrection.”

And so John asks his readers and us today the hard question of why we do the things we do in church: Do we do them because they deepen our relationship with God or do we do them because we are so caught up in the “business of running the church” that we fail to see the presence of God among us, moving among us, calling us to a new beginning.

The author of John wants us as people of faith to realize that “God is known and visible, that God is met and experienced, not in the rituals and practices of the Temple but in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.”

Today, the author of John is driving us out of the Temple and into the world, where we will experience the presence of God in our brothers and sisters of faith. Today, the author of John is driving us out of the Temple and into our community, where we are called to share the Light of God and drive away the darkness. Today, the author of John is driving us out of the Temple, and into the world, where we can experience the presence of God who has claimed us as God’s own.

Today, we are being driven out of the Temple to go out into the world and experience the presence of God, stirring us to deepen our relationship with God and with all of God’s creation.

May we open our eyes and our heart to new beginnings, to the new life that is all around us.  
Amen.

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