

“Temple Practices”
Scripture: John 2:13-22
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One of the most vivid stories of Jesus is when he went to the Temple in Jerusalem and created a disturbance, often called the “cleansing of the Temple.” Turning over the tables of the money-changers...driving the animals out of the Temple courtyard...and in our account today, the detail of making a “whip of cords.”

The Gospel of John gives two distinctive twists to this story—timing and meaning of this event. First, the timing: the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke set this story in the days of Holy Week—Jesus has entered Jerusalem with a palm processional on Sunday, creates the ruckus in the Temple, and the plot to arrest and try him kicks into high gear; by Friday, he has been tried, convicted, nailed to cross, and buried in stone tomb. In contrast, the Gospel of John tells this story at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry—several more years of ministry take place after this. This event is not the beginning of the end...but rather the beginning of the distancing that Jesus would make with such traditional institutions as the Temple.

Second distinction: The Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke give a moral twist to this story. The money changers and animal dealers were corrupt; they are a “den of thieves.” The Gospel of John does not give such moral judgment. The very presence of the market at all seems to bother Jesus. Even more intriguingly, only in the Gospel of John, we get what the disciples thought was going on during this event. And, we have Jesus’ own answer as to why he can do this. So, listen now to our Scripture reading from the Gospel of John, from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

John 2:¹³ 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.

If you grew up attending Sunday School, you may recall some of the pictures of Jesus shaking up things in the Temple. I will confess to a young boy’s childhood imagination here (I don’t mean to be gender exclusive, but it seems more like a “boy” thing than a “girl” thing here).

What fascinated me as a child in the Sunday School pictures of this story was the whip! I thought, “wouldn’t that be fun to have a whip to crack over people and animals!” Again, I think this is sort of a guy thing. One false trail for us to follow today is that some of us want to find out when we can have unrestrained anger. When can I make a whip of cords and slap all those things that are bothering me...when can I overturn tables...when can I just let loose with all that anger that I have keep bottled up? If we are supposed to be like Jesus, when can we be like this?

No, this is not a text about unrestrained anger...it is rather a text about sacrifice—a theme that is not immediately obvious. Jesus has just created an incredible disturbance in the Temple. And what do the disciples remember about this event? Listen closely to what the text says: His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” This is a reference to Psalm 69:9. The disciples associate what Jesus is doing to Scripture—to Psalm 69—to this passion for the Temple, for the house of God...a zeal that not only captivates but consumes, eats ups...maybe even destroys. So, for the disciples this incident is about what consumes Jesus.

You see, we know that Jesus loved the Temple. He was steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures. When he said the words of Psalm 23, “And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever,” he meant the Temple. Remember that story from the Gospel of Luke where as a twelve-year old Jesus stayed behind after a Passover visit to the Temple. His parents headed home, thinking Jesus was in the caravan returning to Nazareth, but he stayed behind in Jerusalem. When they discovered he was missing, they rush back to Jerusalem. Here’s what we have in Luke:

⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” ⁴⁹ He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them. [*Luke 2:46-50*]

Isn’t that a bit of an understatement? “They did not understand what he said to them.” They did not understand his passion for the Temple.

And lest you think that Jesus was somehow upset that money-changing and selling of animals was going on, there is no indication of that in John’s telling of this story. In John’s account of the story, there is no mention of the moral corruption of these dealers. These dealers were actually doing a necessary service.

Consider the animal dealers: cattle, sheep and doves were needed for burnt offerings in the Temple according to Leviticus 1 and 3. The Passover was a pilgrimage feast—many of those coming would have traveled a great distance and it would have been extremely difficult to bring animals with them. People traveling from great distances needed to buy animals in Jerusalem in order to participate in temple worship. Similarly, there was an expected Temple contribution

that the pilgrims made—a Temple tax. This contribution could not be paid in Greek or Roman coinage because of the human image (the emperor’s head) on these coins. Foreign coins had to be changed into the legal currency in Jerusalem. The work of animal dealers and the money changers supported the ministry of the Temple—in some ways, no different than a bank that provides deposit services for church contributions or a grocery store that sells bread and grape juice we use for communion.

And also remember this: when Jesus was an infant, Mary and Joseph brought him to the Temple. They presented a thank offering in the Temple—a pair of turtledoves or pigeons. We are not told where they got these sacrificial animals, but it is reasonable to assume that they bought them in Jerusalem...even at the Temple. Jesus’ parents likely used the services provided there.

So, here is what we have: Jesus is passionately connected to the Temple so that the disciples remembered the Scripture where the zeal for the house of God was all-consuming. It ate Jesus up. Something is being sacrificed here...Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple is a sacrifice of himself. He is giving up what is precious to him—running out the animals needed for sacrifice... overturning the very financial underpinning of operating the Temple. These practices are not needed anymore. No longer will the presence of God be localized in this place. Jesus is giving up what is precious to him.

Now this may be a stretch analogy, so stay with me. Did you catch the news article this week about a South Carolina legislator who suggested that perhaps the University of South Carolina, a state-funded and sponsored institution, may need to give up their mascot, “the fighting Gamecocks?” Why? Because the state legislature is considering tightening up state laws about the treatment of animals—particularly that practice of training animals to fight. I am going to make a judgmental statement here: There is nothing redeeming about teaching animals to fight each other and gambling on the result! Whether you put a hog and dog together to see which one lives or whether you put two roosters together with razor talons attached to cut each other up—there is nothing worthwhile here. So, the legislature is considering tightening up the laws about such practices. And one legislator was candid enough to ask: How can we support such laws and also be supportive of a mascot, “the fighting gamecocks,” which is a reference to training roosters to fight to the death and gambling over the bloody result?

My hunch is that the legislator making this suggestion did not go the University of South Carolina...did not grow up wearing Gamecock sweatshirts and flying Gamecock flags...did not go grow up with the sort of lift to the spirit on hearing that “Ee-er-eroo!” sound played over the loudspeaker at USC games. For all I know, this is a fiendish plot by Clemson graduates to pluck a tail feather from a Gamecock!

But, humor my imagination; what if all the USC alums got together and said: “As much we love this symbol, we are going to give it up. It is not the right message about the State of South Carolina that we hold a symbol of such inhumane treatment of one God’s creatures.” Now, I have no illusion that’s going to happen, but what a sacrifice that would be...it would be

consuming...it would be a zeal for what is best that supercedes the deep passion for what has been.

That's Jesus...zeal for the Temple is consuming him because he is giving it up. No longer do you need animals to sacrifice...no longer do you need to the Temple contribution. Something else is taking the place of all that. Remember Jesus is asked for a "sign" to justify his actions. And he gives one of those statements so typical in this Gospel—taken literally, it makes no sense... understood deeper, it connects with us. Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Destroy this temple? Which temple—the one made of great stones, wood, and precious metals? No, not that temple but rather this temple of his own body...and that temple will be raised up.

So typical of this Gospel of John—confusion about the literal and missing the depth. This is the Gospel that has Jesus saying, "You must be born again," and a man responding, "No one can go back into the womb!" Or Jesus saying: "I have water for you to drink," and a woman replying: "You don't even have a bucket to put in the well!" Or Jesus saying: "I am the bread of life," and some pulling back, thinking: "We are not cannibals—we don't eat people!"

Jesus is saying there is no more need for the Temple because "I am the temple." The Temple was wonderful...you had a place for God...you had a place for getting right with God...Jesus was passionately connected to the Temple...but he gives it up. And it consumes him...it puts him on a cross. It is sacrifice.

I suppose if you do not watch television, read the paper, or listen to the radio, the phrase "March Madness" would not mean anything to you. It is, of course, a reference to the college basketball tournament that has begun. One of the greatest college coaches of all time is a man by the name of John Wooden. For years, John Wooden defined team spirit as the "willingness to sacrifice personal interest or glory for the welfare of all." However, there was something not quite right about the definition for Wooden. Oh, he shared it with his players, but it did not seem quite right for Coach Wooden—this "willingness to sacrifice." One day, it occurred to him what was wrong with this definition: it is not the *willingness* to sacrifice...it is the *eagerness* to sacrifice. It is this *eagerness* to sacrifice personal interest for the sake of all that truly defines team spirit.

Eagerness...zeal...zeal for the house of God consumed Jesus: he gave up the Temple. No more need for sacrificial animals, he would be that sacrifice. No more need to support the institution that kept the presence of God localized to one place: where his people would be, there Jesus would be also.

Back to those old Sunday School pictures of this story: there is a much deeper question here than when can I be like Jesus and pick up a whip and overturn things? More to the point is this: when can I be like Jesus and be consumed by the spirit of sacrificing personal interest and glory for the welfare of all? What are we eager to make sacrifices for? If there is no eagerness...that speaks volumes. If the eagerness is only for *my* children...for *my* job...for *my* excitement...for *my* controlling how someone else acts, then we are idolatrous—we are serving other gods than the one true God.

You have probably heard it said that a “Picture is worth a thousand words.” Let me describe one of the few visuals that is ever allowed in a Quaker meeting house. The Quakers—a devoted expression of Christian faith—have stressed absolute simplicity: no stained glass windows; no fine pews; no Gothic architecture; no glistening organ pipes; no mahogany pulpits; not even a communion table or baptismal fount. But one of the few visuals that is permitted in a Quaker meeting house is a picture: a picture of an ox—one of those animals that could be sacrificed in the Temple. An ox—an animal that was not around to be a pet but to work the field, pull the cart, to do all that was necessary to run a farm.

This Quaker picture shows an ox standing between an altar and a plow. These are our choices: sacrifice or service. No, I don’t need a whip of cords...I just need the zeal to consume me for sacrifice and service.