

JESUS' JOURNEY AS A FAITHFUL JEW

"Temple & Tables – Turning Over Our Tendencies"

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John 2:13-22

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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Jesus Cleanses the Temple

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.

I. A MAN WENT TO THE TEMPLE TO PRAY

Once upon a time, a devout, somewhat youngish Jewish man, went up to Jerusalem. "Going up to Jerusalem, for faithful Jews, meant to go to church, and at this moment in time, to celebrate the Passover with his faith community.

Pilgrims from all over the land made this journey alongside him—and there was great rejoicing as they went up to celebrate, bring their offerings to God, and practice their faith and worship together.

This particular pilgrim was exploring a call to ministry—sensing that Yahweh was calling him to be an itinerant preacher and teacher of sorts. He'd just *begun* exploring that Call—but he was definitely compelled—on fire even!—with a passion for God, faith and his particular religious tradition. He saw God and faith changing people's lives and the world in powerful ways.

He loved to go to church! To "Visit My Father's House!" He loved to worship, to sing hymns, to dance in the courts of the Temple, feast in fellowship at the potlucks, offer prayers and celebrate the Presence of God—not just here in the Temple, but everywhere!

For Jews believed that God truly was present to and through and among them—in all places—but they felt God's Spirit even more powerfully when they came together to worship communally.

So far, his ministry had consisted of a wedding celebration with his family and friends, and somehow God had seen fit to bless his presence there, in order to bless everyone when the wine ran out!

He was still puzzling over that one! What exactly had happened that day? Had the Father called him to do parlor tricks, as signs of the Divine Presence? Or, was he to be about something much more profound? Much more world-changing?

II. TEMPESTS IN THE TEMPLE?

When he arrived, his heart soared! So many people, from all over the world! So much hustle and bustle all over Jerusalem, but *especially* at the Temple complex! This incredible place—the center of the faith for Jews, but also a place where *all* pilgrims seeking God were welcome—was ginormous!

It was the size of twelve soccer fields! Put end to end. Just imagine that. It had several “courts”—different areas for different sacred purposes. The inner sanctum, or Holy of Holies, where only the priests would go—and only one day a year! The Court of the Priests, the Court of Israel, the Court of the Women, and the Court of the Gentiles. Yes! You heard that right, the Gentiles were *more* than welcome to come and worship, alongside the practicing Jews—the Temple truly was a place of prayer for all the nations.

In all these courts there was so much energy! Excitement! Like a family reunion. For it was Festival Time! The best time of year! Friends and family

greeting one another, preparing to celebrate for days on end, how God had brought them safely out of Egypt and slavery into a life of freedom. How they were now free to practice their faith and follow the teachings of Torah—the Gift of the Law’s Guidance that they were given by their gracious and loving God.

The Teacher felt his heart soaring, as he was caught up in the hub-bub and the smells and sights and sounds all around!

In the outer court, the Court of the Gentiles, there were sheep and goats, cows and doves milling around and bleating and baa-ing. Part of their religious practice was offering sacrifices to God, but also feasting with gratitude—as they enjoyed the gifts of the earth to.

Also in that outer court were the Currency Exchange booths. Thankfully, one didn’t have to go far to find a place to procure some local currency—for this was *needed* for the offering plate at church. (Credit cards were not accepted at the Temple, and Euros hadn’t been invented yet!)

And, because this vital service was right here at the Temple Square, one could trust that the exchange rate was *fair*—as good as you were going to find. If those vendors started milking the tourists, they would soon find themselves out of a booth.

III. “CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE”

And the man looked around. And he took it all in. And his initial excitement started to wane.... He watched and listened to the bartering over the animals, and the haggling about transactions that were supposed to be for a “holy purpose”: worship and offerings on the high holy days to the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, and something just didn’t seem right.

How was this “Marketplace” any different than any *other* place on any other day? Wasn’t church and the Holy Days of Passover supposed to be *sacred*? Set apart? Focused on praising God and rededicating our lives to God, instead of about doing commerce? How did this business of providing for the rites of the faith turn into such “business as usual?”

And the prophet’s heart swelled up within him. His passion for God and the worship of the Holy One filled his heart and his body, and before he knew it, he had staged a protest!

He looked around and found some strands of straw and braided them into a rope of sorts and started herding those sheep and goats and cattle right out of there! This is a **church**! Not a shopping mall! A play to pray and play before the Lord, not a place to *pay*!

On a roll, he then turned to the Currency Exchange vendors and said,

“Hey guys. I know you’re performing a needed service here, but can’t you find a better place than the church

lobby for your Gift Shop? This Tourist Stand with trinkets at the cathedral is a distraction at best, and profanity or worse, in my book.”

“How about the parking lot? You can do your business there, but this is a house of prayer, and we’ve gotten things a little convoluted and comingled. It’s time to take a hard look at our priorities.”

“I wonder if we can find a better way,” this man, Jesus, wondered aloud. “Not abandon our faith at all, but take a good look at how we experience God; find God’s Presence, capital P; how we honor and prioritize the Holy One in our lives and practices?”

“Scripture gives us the guidance we need, you all! From Genesis to Malachi—all through the Torah—the Law and the Prophets. I think it’s time we got “back to the Bible” a bit more and looked at *all* our ministry and teaching through fresh eyes. Even our church programs and placement of projects and priorities in our church building and on the communal grounds.”

IV. WHAT WE’VE ALWAYS THOUGHT?

This story might strike you as a little different than how you’ve heard it before. Four gospels tell this story—in slightly, or not-so-slightly, different ways, and even put it in different stages of Jesus’s life and ministry.

It’s often discussed at the start of Holy Week—on Palm Sunday, in fact—the evening following the Triumphal Entry. Part of the richness of studying

scripture is exploring those differences in the gospel telling, and wondering what meaning the writer was trying *most* to convey.

Rather curiously, here, in the Gospel of John, this “Cleansing the Temple” moment is literally the second public event of Jesus’s fledgling ministry. He gets right to it, doesn’t he?! Changes water to wine and then turns some tables and challenges some tendencies.

V. NOT EVEN THE SCHOLARS AGREE

Our tendencies are *also* challenged by these different understandings of Jesus, his ministry and message, and his context. For Jesus was, indeed, a faithful Jew practicing first-century Judaism.

The way you and I have understood this story and many scripture stories has likely come from gospel writers writing much later and admittedly a little “anti-Jewish,” as well as Christian scholars down through the ages coming from a number of schools of thought and study.

For instance, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan and others, have suggested that Jesus is crying out against a kind of “Temple Domination System,” that excludes and exploits the poor—the least of these, to fill the coffers of the rich.

Others saw the Temple as a place where Jews were *required* to come—the *only* place God could be worshiped, and pay *far* more than they could afford—

to carry out their sacred duties and make sacrifices to appease a demanding God.

Jewish scholars, who study all scriptures, as well as the midrash of the Rabbis over the ages, help us to understand Judaism in its different eras and settings. They say we might *possibly* have “blinders on” when we look at Judaism and its practices and institutions only through Christian lenses and later interpretations of Jesus.

Perhaps the Temple was *not* a place of rigid laws and extorting the poor for tax payments, as we might have traditionally thought. Hmmm....

I can’t tell you how many sermons I have preached on this passage, or the telling of it in Matthew, Mark or Luke, and assumed the “money changers” were charging exorbitant rates for poor peasants who had no choice but to use their services, or they wouldn’t be allowed to go into the Temple.

That said pilgrims, very poor, wouldn’t be considered a “good Jew” for the year if they didn’t make the required sacrifice—whether they could afford it or not, and whether they were being taken advantage of or not. That “no admission” would be the verdict, after they’d come all this way to the festival.

Well. It’s very likely that I was just plain wrong. It’s possible that these money changers were not “extortionists” at all, but provided a needed service. (Think “Exchange Currency” booths at our airports.

You're mighty glad to see one of those if, after a long journey, you don't have the correct currency of the place you've just landed!)

Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar of the New Testament at Vanderbilt, along with others who study all the scriptures and Judaism in depth, says that our whole understanding of the Temple, its central role in Jewish life and faith, and the practices there might be a tad skewed. Especially if we think of it as an exclusive, demanding, unwelcoming-to-others kind of place.

Levine says the Temple was a wonderful place that people flocked to with joy. Looked forward to visiting, made pilgrimages to practice their spiritual lives.

“[The Temple] was a place of restoration, pilgrimage, worship, and inspiration. A place where one made sacrificial offerings, and the Temple made the offerings on behalf of all the people. But God was omnipresent: in the village and on the farm, at the family table and the synagogue, *as well as* in the Jerusalem Temple.”

Levine admits that there are many ways of interpreting this particular act on Jesus' part—calls it “an open question,” but suggests a little different take than other scholars:

“What Jesus himself was protesting in the Temple, in that scene so familiar from Hollywood recreations, remains an open question. When Jesus declares, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!”, Jesus is hearkening back to a

prophecy in Zechariah (14:21) where the prophet is envisioning a time when “there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord.”

That Jesus is giving a hopeful prophecy here—proclaiming a vision of a Great Big Welcoming Table from the Old Testament:

Every cooking pot in Jerusalem and in all Judah will be set apart for use in the worship of the LORD Almighty. The people who offer sacrifices will use them for boiling the meat of the sacrifices. When that time comes, there will no longer be any merchant in the Temple of the LORD Almighty. (Zech 14)

This perspective from Judaism paints a picture of the Temple as a far more welcoming place already than we have come to understand. Gentiles (all non-Jews) were most welcome to join in the life of the Temple—there was even a Court of the Gentiles. Jews did not exclude non-Jews from their sacred life.

Gentiles might not be welcomed into the “inner sanctum and practices”—like a non-Christian might be encouraged not to partake of Communion or serve on a board if not an actual member of a Christian church, but this is not what Jesus was turning the tables about.

“For John, she suggests, the focus is not on Gentile worship. It is on the **placement of the vendors**, which in Jesus's view disrupted the sanctity of the site. One might compare it to a beautiful cathedral with a gift shop in the narthex.” (Passion Week book)

VI. WHAT MATTERS

So, let's take a fresh look and ponder a moment:

Was Jesus mad that there were sheep, goats and other critters milling around the outer court of the Temple? Was he not impressed with those who'd set up shop – sitting at their booths exchanging money?

Was he hearkening back to a prophecy about a different kind of vision for the Temple that was to come? Calling them to something broader and more welcoming and expansive—in their religious practice and in their communal relationships?

Did Jesus share a vision of the Temple as truly a House of prayer for all nations from his tradition, that he was simply reminding them of? Bringing them back to, as the core of their faith?

Where extravagant welcome was extended so lavishly that a temple tax in the local currency was no longer required, and money changers were a dying industry—no longer needed in the House of the Lord of all?

Could it be *all* of the above? Could it be that he wasn't lambasting those who provided a “necessary evil”—like money exchange, but that he wanted to redirect their focus? That, along with turning over some tables, Jesus was turning over some preconceived notions—then and now?

Challenging all his disciples to explore their skewed, or at least *mixed* priorities?

What tables are *we* willing to overturn? What misguided focus, priorities or behaviors are we willing to confront, and consider and even nudge out or drive out? In our own lives, and also from our “collective house?”

What “business as usual” are we willing to challenge? What status quo will we stand up to and name as injustice? Where are we brave enough, like Jesus, to speak out against what's out of place, or in the wrong place and time, and call us back to the vision God has had for God's people all along? To life in the Kingdom of God, not of the world?

You see, we might have some tendencies, like those in the temple courts, to be a little too “transaction focused.” Some blinders that put business, consumerism, getting and giving out, even earning our way, over relationships. It cheapens aspects of our lives and endeavors when they become too “business-focused.”

When life becomes about transactions: “What can I get from this? Will God be pleased if I do thus and so? What can this other person do for me? What's in it for me? Will my needs be met? Will I find what I'm looking for?”

It's not the ACT but the spirit of the system or the relationship—when goals are about numbers and efficiency, and not mostly about **relationships** and **community**. With God and one another.

VII. WHAT ARE WE ZEALOUS ABOUT?

“Zeal for your house will consume me.” we hear in the Psalms, and in words said about Jesus.

What would Jesus want us to be zealous about? What would he say we should be jumping up and down, getting excited about? Turning over tables and taking off our blinders and our preconceived tendencies toward?

As we gather today at the Table, perhaps what Jesus would have us celebrate is this: God’s presence is HERE. Not only in the Temple, or church building; synagogue or mosque. But here, there, everywhere—even on Zoom! Where two or three are gathered in his name!

In Jesus himself—God made incarnate, and in the Christ inside each one of us—beloved children of God.

In the Temple that is the Body of Christ. In the Big Welcoming Table. A house of prayer for all the nations.

Maybe Jesus would remind us that this prophecy from Isaiah has come true, and keeps coming true—with our help!

The LORD says:
To foreigners and all who bind themselves to the Lord
to minister to him,
to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it
and who hold fast to my covenant—

7these I will bring to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.

Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations.”

8The Sovereign Lord declares—
he who gathers the exiles of Israel:
“I will gather still others to them
besides those already gathered.” (Isaiah 56)

Let us embody, in our Table, people of God, the Extravagant Welcome of our Creator God and Jesus the Christ, who has come to teach us who God has been all along. One who desires relationship with us and spiritual sacrifice from us—the wholly giving of our lives in Christ. The God of our ancestors, fathers and mothers, and Jesus, in whose Body we live and move and have our being in Communion, calls us to anything BUT “Business as usual.” Let us commune in Christ, wherever we are, around his Table—a table big enough for all without exception. Amen.