

John 2:13-22 Bill Uetricht 3 Lent 2.29.24

These words from Daniel Clendenin really caught my attention this past week:

No doubt the disciples tossed and turned a long sleepless night that evening; it must have been terribly disconcerting to witness Jesus unhinged, throwing furniture, screaming at the top of his lungs, and flinging money into the air. Perhaps they ran for cover with the crowd. I would have. Did they look him in the eyes the next morning, or shuffle their feet, stare at the ground, and make small talk? I liken their experience to the “crazy uncle” syndrome—who could predict the next outrageous act or violent outburst?

We get a different vision of Jesus today than many of us are accustomed to. Many white, middle class, older Americans have a vision of Jesus that is shaped by paintings like that of Warner Sallman. (Image is shown.) Jesus here looks wispy, clean, safe, perhaps even passive. Let’s face it. Most of us want someone who will reassure us, help us feel good about us and life in general. And I think sometimes Jesus serves that role. After all, according to the memory of the gospel writers, he took children into his arms and blessed them when the crabby disciples wanted to keep them away. He wept at the sight of the dead Lazarus. He was moved in his guts when he came across the crowd of 5000, noting that they were like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus often comes through as a comforting, caring, gentle man, messiah, and savior. But that is not him today. Today he is a “table-turning prophet.”

It’s party time. It’s Passover, as it often is in the Gospel of John. And Jesus is found among the party goers. And during the party, he comes into the temple, not the inner sanctum, but the entrance

area. And there he finds what you would often see there: people selling things, especially animals for sacrifice, and also money changers, who would take the filthy Roman money that did not belong in the temple and turn it into currency that could be used there. What Jesus sees there, though, he despises. John tells us that Jesus made a whip of cords and then drove all the sellers out of the temple, along with all the cattle and sheep. He then pours all the money changers' cash out on the floor and turns upside down all the tables. Whoa! This is a Jesus we didn't expect. Passive, wispy, always-tell-us-what-we-want-to-hear Jesus? No way!

In John, Jesus particularly challenges the dove sellers. It was to them that he addressed these words: "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace," or as Eugene Peterson puts it, "a shopping mall." The dove sellers were those who sold animals to poor people. The poor couldn't afford the bigger animals, but they could come up with the money for the doves. But the sellers of the doves, nonetheless, took advantage of the poor. They inflated the cost of those little birds. The dove sellers really receive Jesus' wrath today.

When I was a kid where I came from people often interpreted this story as a justification for why the youth group shouldn't be selling brownies or popcorn at the church. Jesus doesn't want us to make the church a marketplace. The church becomes filthy when money is exchanged for products. And so, all kinds of rules were developed to limit what people could sell at the church. Now frankly, that kind of conversation is not all bad, but that is not the point of John's gospel today. It represents a taming of the message.

Jesus is not upset with the bake sale today. He is angry with the whole temple system. John's version of this story is very different than the one we encounter in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There we get the sense that Jesus wants to reform the temple system, especially

that part which takes advantage of the poor. His upending the tables is one of the last things he does before he gets crucified. It's the last straw, if you will. In John, however, this story happens at the beginning of his gospel and maps out what the life of Jesus, his death and resurrection, will be all about. In John, Jesus is not simply reforming the temple, he is replacing it.

That's what the confusing conversation in today's text about Jesus' body and the temple is all about. Jesus says to the Judeans after his tirade in the temple, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Judeans, being the literalists that they are, respond, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?" And then John in his commentary tells us: "But he was speaking of the temple of his body." You will kill my body (the new temple), but I will raise it back up. For John, Jesus is the new temple. The body of Jesus is the place now to meet the presence of God. For John, Jesus is the new focus. Jesus is the new sheriff in town. Jesus is where God meets us.

Now I must say that with a caveat. Sadly, this perspective has been used throughout history to justify anti-Semitism, hatred of the Jews. Our guy and our religion are a lot better than yours. Your institutions and your rituals don't matter. They've been done away with. This is a very unfortunate, tragic, and immoral consequence of John's vision. I am not at all recommending that we go down that path. It has produced miserable results. Anti-Semitism is anti-Christian.

But what John is up to is worth our while paying attention to. Jesus does mean radical newness. And that newness does challenge all of the oldness. The temple was big for Jews. Much of their religiosity was wrapped up in it. And the reality of Jesus unsettles this old system. Honestly, Jesus unsettles every system.

Dan Clendenin says that he understands John's story of the table-turning prophet as a "stark warning against any and every false sense of security." He claims that "misplaced allegiances, religious presumption, spiritual complacency, nationalist zeal, political idolatry, and economic greed in the name of God are only some of the tables that Jesus would overturn in his day and in ours."

That is to say, Jesus challenges all our misdirected loyalties. In many ways, what Jesus is up today, while radically new, is in some ways amazingly old. Jesus in his zeal is taking us back to the heart of the Ten Words or Ten Commandments that we meet in Exodus today, words that are fundamentally about idolatry, misdirected loyalties. The first word in the Ten Commandments is this: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me." I am your God. I have brought you into freedom. To trust that is to allow me to be God and nothing else. Nothing. Not your nation. Not your flag. Not your military might. Not your political candidate or political party. Not your opinions. Not your church. Not your religious assumptions. Not your pastor. Not your family. Not your house. Not your stuff. Not your economic system. Not your means for making a living. Not your job. Not the things that make you feel worthwhile and important at the expense of others. Nothing else is worthy of being God. Jesus is overturning every part of every system that somehow suggests that the God we meet in him is not God.

Now I think you realize that the powers-that-be do not look kindly upon those who unsettle our little systems, who take on our gods. The powers-that-be, including, frankly, us, don't like to have our tables turned upside down. Back in the sixties, Martin Luther King, Jr. turned upside down some tables. And although today many consider him a hero, back in those days he wasn't viewed that way.

He was thought to be a troublemaker. Representatives of the system, particularly the FBI, were constantly investigating him. And eventually he was murdered. Eventually, Jesus is going to be murdered. We don't like people who unsettle us, especially our little systems based upon our puny gods. We often try to get rid of those people.

The cross, and this is one of John's points, will unveil a world that deals with table-turning love by crucifying it. In many ways, it is a depressing image. It is a hard thing to look at. Staring at the consequences of our idolatries is tough on the stomach and especially the heart.

But John will not be content to force us to look at the cross only to see human failure, to gaze at what idolatry brings about. No, John will say that the cross, while amazingly tragic, is at the same time amazingly glorious. It is a phenomenal view. Next week we will hear from John that "God so loved the world that he gave his only son." For John, that giving takes place at the cross. Jesus on the cross is a gift of love. The cross for John is amazing love.

You see, the God who asks for our great loyalty is the one who brings us out of the land of Egypt, who brings us into the land of freedom, who loves us. The cross is that love written large, so large that the whole world can see it. It is so large that it is even bigger than our rejection of it. The task, it seems to me, is to give into that love, to put into their proper place the systems that represent our idolatries.

Jesus, please come and turn upside down our tables. Take us to you. And then reveal to us to the God who is worthy of our ultimate allegiance, the God of love.