

“A Zealous God” Lectionary year (B) 3 Lent

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First Lutheran Muskegon, MI

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Exodus , 10; Psalm 19; I Cor 1:18-35; John 2:13-22

Business is booming. It's Passover. The merchants and money changers in the temple courtyard are exchanging money at rates that would likely close our stock market at an all time high for the day. Between collecting temple taxes (and charging an exorbitant exchange rate while doing so) and providing unblemished, sacrificial animals to anyone who showed up empty handed - or to those who showed up with an animal who may have had a skirmish along the way - the religious authorities, merchants and the money changers made out pretty good. However, the Jewish people attending Passover, did not.

And this... is where Jesus enters the narrative today in the gospel of John. Jesus enters the temple courtyard, and with a makeshift whip - animals scurry, doves fly everywhere, merchants are driven out of the temple, and Jesus...overturns...the tables. Jesus...turns the tables...upside down. Chaos, mess, confusion and maybe even fear. Jesus, gentle Jesus ...so lowly, meek and mild - interrupting the sacrificial system for the sake of justice (and for the sake of establishing a righteous authority). Interrupting the mistreatment of the vulnerable and marginalized people in his society. Interrupting the hierarchical religious structure which had intermingled with the grace of God. So how do you **NOT** flip the tables? How do you NOT flip the tables?

You know, this attention-getting scene in John's gospel has gotten a lot of press over the years. A scene which is also found in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. These first three gospels place this story at the end of Jesus' ministry - as the final act which precipitates (prompts) his arrest, trial and ultimately, his crucifixion. John, however, places this story at the beginning of his gospel and he uses it to announce the inauguration of a new era, an era in which the peoples' access to God would no longer be through the temple-based mechanisms of the religious authorities, but through Jesus himself and "the temple of his body." A new era where the sacrificial system would no longer stand as the entryway to worshipping God. A new era where a marketplace full of deceit, exploitation and big business would no longer operate under the guise of the Jewish people's relationship with a liberating, loving and life-giving God. A new era, where a new temple, will be resurrected in the form... of a cross.

But truthfully, it's a bit hard for me to read this familiar scene without over-humanizing Jesus' anger. In fact, I can't count the number of times in my life that someone has said in an attempt to *justify* their own reaction to something or someone, "Well..even Jesus got angry." I distinctly

remember a time when one of our kids (I won't mention names, here) used this phrase after displaying a bit of rage at his brother for messing with some of his "things."

Was his anger justified? Probably, but his outburst had nothing to do with Jesus flipping the tables.

Jesus' extreme show of force in the gospel of John had more to do with Jesus going up against the religious power in Jerusalem and attacking the economic basis of the Temple, than it did with the emotion of anger. Yet, something inside me still wants to sit with the fact that the *One* - who we now know to be the sacrificial lamb and the resurrected Christ - has a fierce love and will flip the tables for the mistreatment of the least, the lost and the left behind.

We, and I would assume many of those within earshot of Jesus that day in the courtyard, get an even bigger glimpse of this new temple emerging in the gospel of John today through, perhaps, the retrospective dialogue of the disciples: "The zeal for your house will consume me." Jesus' own motivation, his own dedication to God will consume him.

And my conditioned response to what the disciples remembered at this interval in the narrative, would lean into the fact that *Jesus'* own zeal on behalf of the Temple - will end his life. But as theologian John Petty states - the likeliest rendering of this statement is not... *the zeal "for" your house will consume me*, but...*the zeal "of" your house will consume me*.

One tiny, little word that would turn the world upside down. The zeal "of" *Temple* power will consume Jesus, which... it did.

I cannot help but wonder what this means for me, maybe for you, for us... today, as we move through Lent...this year. As we journey to the cross with a heightened awareness of how religious systems can go awry.

Paul tells us today in the reading from Corinthians, that "God made foolish the wisdom of the world." But to those who are called by God - Jews and Greeks, Americans, Mexicans and Asians; all people of color; Catholic, Methodist and Muslim; gay, straight, young... and old - Christ *is* God's ultimate miracle and wisdom all wrapped up in one.

This is the point where I initially intended to end the sermon today. Christ *is* God's ultimate miracle and wisdom all wrapped up in one. Christ *is* the new "temple" which fills the world with love, and grace and forgiveness - for free. And as I was just about to put the "Amen" at the end, I thought about this story: I remembered two young students of mine whose parents were going through a divorce and with all the disarray this brings to the lives of children and their parents, the boys showed up late to school. The lunch count had already been taken and the person in authority would not add them to the list. These two broken-hearted, scared and hungry boys were denied food. It broke my heart and it was so wrong.

Ultimately, there were others who saw into the hearts of the boys and we rounded up a hearty lunch and the boys ate with me in my room. And so... I ask myself, and you...

...how do you NOT flip the tables?

And when a deadly virus brings to light social and economic vulnerability, inequality and disparity in level of healthcare...

...how do you NOT flip the tables?

When miles of cars line up in stadiums and parking lots for a box of food to feed their family

...how do you NOT flip the tables?

When systemic racism leads parents to teach their children how they should act when confronted by a stranger...how do you NOT flip the tables?

(And) God... forgive us... for the times we desired a seat at a table you would've flipped. Amen.