

Third Sunday in Lent – Year B
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John 2:13-22

Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!

When we hear this Gospel story of Jesus coming into the temple and making a whip of cords to drive out the animals and the money changers, we automatically conclude that Jesus is ANGRY! But we are never actually told what Jesus is feeling. Instead, his behavior is described as "ZEAL".

But what was Jesus so zealous about? What was the source of his intense enthusiasm? What cause was he working for?

In order to better understand what Jesus was so fired up about when he walked into the temple, it is necessary to briefly look at the role of the temple in his day.

Temples in the ancient world functioned in fundamentally different ways from the manner in which synagogues and churches operate in our Western civilization. We work diligently to maintain the separation of church and state even though these boundaries are increasingly more permeable.

But in the ancient world the formation of the nation state required that the kingdom's chief deity approved of and supported the concentration of power in the hands of the new ruler.

Consequently, the building of a temple nearly always accompanied the establishment of a dynastic power. The temple was a symbol that the deity favored and legitimized the formation of a new system of governance and it was used to gain the loyalty of the populace.

The construction of the Temple in Jerusalem was therefore intertwined with the formation of the Israelite state and to the imperial king, starting with David and continuing to the time of Jesus.

His attack on the temple is recorded in all four Gospels, but only in John at the beginning of his ministry. Placing the story at this point in the gospel highlights the ongoing battle that Jesus will have with the Jews over a variety of theological issues.

From the outset we must recognize that Jesus' mission will bring him into conflict with his own people and will ultimately result in his death.

John's account introduces large animals (oxen and sheep) into the scene in addition to the pigeons of the Synoptic versions, thus heightening the drama of expulsion. This event is magnified by Jesus actually making a whip to carry out this expulsion.

Jesus was not just protesting the temple's lack of spirituality, nor was he merely criticizing the marketplace commercial activities associated with the sacrificial system, or the exclusion of people from the house of God.

Jesus was attacking the Temple system itself.

Scholars tell us that ancient temples served a crucial function in making economic exploitation possible. Kings needed to convince farmers to produce more and give their surplus to support the ruling class. This was accomplished best through religion. The idea was to develop a system of beliefs that defined people's obligations to the deity in regard to giving their surplus goods.

This means that the religion of the temple was always political with economic consequences. Temples reflected the interests of the rulers and articulated their ideologies.

The two most important functions of the temple were to legitimize a particular regime and to mystify the exploitation of the populace by representing it in the form of an obligation to God.

In addition, rulers typically came to power by violent means so they had to legitimate their rule from might to right – that is to say, from military force to law. Rulers needed a foundation that only religion could provide – the confirmation that they ruled by mandate from God – Yahweh.

In the second half of this Gospel Jesus goes on to predict the destruction of the Temple. His audience assumed he was talking about the physical temple, but we are told that he was referring to the temple of his body. Is it possible that he had both systems in mind?

Jesus was all about confronting the established order that oppressed and excluded the poor, the marginalized and the outcast. He preached that the kingdom of God was at hand. This kingdom was not going to be a replica of the earthly structures and systems that dominated the world. Rather, a new order that promoted justice, peace and met the needs of all people, not just the privileged few. Could he have meant that the day was coming when the current system would be replaced with a new social order based on God's terms?

Likewise, couldn't there be a physical, emotional and spiritual transformation for every individual as well? The time was at hand when God would heal all of our brokenness, pain and suffering even if the world inflicted its worst upon us – violence and death. Our being raised up from the depths would be a sign that the new heavenly age was upon us.

Doesn't God encompass all that is? Including individuals as well as institutional and societal structures? If Jesus was operating on these different levels, aren't we called to do the same? With this presumption, let us look at what this might mean for us.

Would it be a stretch to say that we currently live within an economic system that employs some of the same dynamics as the one in Jesus' day? Isn't there a top layer of people who benefit greatly from the system and a bottom level of poor, marginalized, outcast people who suffer as well?

Would it be fair to say that our symbols of power today are the financial or commerce centers and governmental buildings such as the White House or the Pentagon? Is it possible that these concrete buildings represent and serve similar roles as the Temple in Jerusalem?

Taking this one step further: weren't there other groups in Jesus' day such as the Zealots that sought to overthrow or change the ruling powers of their day by means of violence or revolt? They were filled with Zeal for their cause, just as Jesus was for his. But why is it that some zealous people choose violence to achieve their goals, while others practice non-violence?

I would propose that we have many modern day examples of zealous people who fit into one or the other of these categories.

Let us look first at some modern day zealots who took up violence in order to achieve their goal. Take for instance the case of Timothy McVeigh. He concluded that the ruling system in the United States was wrong so he decided to blow up a Federal building in order to make a point. Would I be out of touch to suggest that the bombings on 9/11 were also made on our national symbols of power by other zealous men who thought our system was corrupt?

And then there are other figures filled with zeal like Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Desmond Tutu, Oscar Romeo, Nelson Mandela and Gandhi who also thought that the systems that they lived under were bankrupt so they set out to challenge and make a change to the institutional powers as well. Only they did so in a non-violent manner.

How is it that some zealous people set out to confront the powers that be in a non-violent way, while others with the same amount of zeal, choose violence as their method of change? And then there are others who start out on one end of this spectrum and somehow move to the other.

Could it be that there is a fine line between these two approaches? What distinguishes one type of person from another? Or do we all have the potential within us to pursue either approach?

It is clear from our Gospel today that when Jesus walked into the Temple in Jerusalem, his zeal arose when he saw what was happening there. His actions were aggressive and violent in nature. He verbally admonished the money changers, overturned tables and drove out livestock. These actions were meditated and planned out as is evidenced by his taking time to make a whip out of cords.

This contrasts with the way Jesus usually approaches situations so it appears that he was able to move within that spectrum of non-violence and violence. But what stopped him from taking the next step of causing physical harm or death to the animals or money changers? How did he keep his zeal in check?

I believe it was his personal, intimate relationship with God that kept him from going further along this path. The same argument could also be made for all those other people who expressed their zeal in a non-violent manner. Even for people who do not profess any faith in God it is likely that their connection to the environment and to other human beings keeps them from going too far down the path of violence.

But what about those zealous people who profess a deep and profound faith in God and believe that their acts of violence, oppression, exploitation and war are sanctioned and supported by the divine because their cause is just? Could they be right as well?

We as Christians believe that God is loving, compassionate and life-giving. Jesus taught us of a God who loves and cares for everyone – the poor, the sick, the outcast, the peasant, the lost, the rich and the powerful. God wants all of creation to be prosperous and to live in harmony and peace. Many other religious traditions hold these same principles.

Other Christians, however, may look to one of the Old Testament portraits of God as a mighty warrior, a ruthless, vengeful, vindictive judge who punishes and puts people to death for the tiniest infraction of the Law. From this perspective, it is plausible that believers could and would justify violent actions to achieve a perceived greater good.

Zeal can take us down different paths. How do we know which road to follow?

The answer, I believe, comes by following in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

Did Jesus' behavior actually change the temple system? – No. Did he employ some aggressive tactics? – Yes. Did he go to the other end of the spectrum by destroying human life? – No. Yet his behavior caught people's attention and challenged their thinking about the structures and practices of the day that exploited and oppressed the many for the benefit of the few.

Does this mean that as followers of Christ we are all called to go out and protest against social ills, governments or institutions that are corrupt and oppressive? Are we supposed to change the country's economic or social structures? Do we all need to commit civil disobedience? Do these responsibilities lie solely in our hands?

Even though Jesus was not successful in changing the temple system or the economic plight of the poor and marginalized, his zealous behavior suggests that it is still important to call attention to these issues.

More importantly, however, it is Jesus' complete and total trust in God as the change agent in the world. Jesus preaches that the kingdom of God is at hand and that it is a divine act that will accomplish this. Our job is to be prepared and to act accordingly.

So what are you zealous about? What cause or issue burns within you and demands a response? Are you acting on this passion or ignoring it because of other constraints or commitments?

During this season of Lent, I would like to invite all of us to ask these questions of ourselves and of God. How do I maintain my personal, intimate relationship with God? Where is the zeal within me? What am I called to do about it? How is God using me to accomplish the divine mission in the world?

AMEN