

“The Issue With Zeal”

Exodus 20:1-17; I Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

March 7, 2021

It’s a fascinating scene from the Gospels today. For those of us who were raised on a calming, warm, invitational image of Jesus, you know, the type with a smile and a “I love you grin” on His face, Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple is a highly disruptive story, isn’t it? After all, we’ve been taught that Jesus is without sin yet here He is, very much enraged at things going on right there in the Temple. And not only is He mad, but His anger also takes direction, action. Fashioning a whip out of cords, He attacks the merchants and the money-changers right there in the Temple courtyard.

Do you recollect the last time you were mad like that? I mean angry and took action before you even quite knew where you were going with it? I do. I was really hot and bothered about something relating to the kids. Before I knew it, I was emailing off a nice little bit of hatred towards someone. Reading the message to my friend, he suggested that I delete the note and never send it.

Oops, I said. I’d already sent it. I was mad and had what I thought was a good reason to feel that way but the lengths to which I took it were extreme given the provocation.

Jesus, on the other hand, acts in what we’ve got to assume is a reasonable fashion. After all, the offense was not to Him but rather, towards God. Jesus took great offense to the fact that, somehow, somehow, worship of the Father had become so corrupted.

Now in order to understand this particular scene, it helps to know a few things. To begin with, as Jesus enters the Temple, it should be kept in mind that this wasn’t Solomon’s Temple, that one had been destroyed by the Babylonians years prior. Neither was it Nehemiah and Ezra’s Temple. That one had fallen into disrepair. No, the one Jesus entered into that day was one manufactured by none other than Herod.

This particular temple would’ve had a courtyard, walled in but not the center of the building. In this courtyard, unclean things were allowed as opposed to the center where only clean things could enter. It was there, in the courtyard, that the merchants and the money changers set up their operations. And, while the text doesn’t tell us why they were there, we can infer from history and from necessity to the Jewish laws.

To begin with Passover was a religious rite, expected of all Jesus. A pilgrimage in which the faithful Jew could come and be cleansed by the blood of the right animal. They could also pay their Temple tax. That was why both merchants and money changers were needed. The merchants were there to sell spotless livestock, a requirement for sacrificial animals. Well, let’s say you had a perfect goat ah, but alas, you lived far away. What was the likelihood that your special, flawless goat would be so when you traveled 200 miles with it? Not so great.

So, here’s what you did. You sold your flawless goat where you lived. Then, you travelled with your money to Jerusalem. Then, when you got into the Temple courtyard, you simply bought another unblemished goat for the sacrifice.

At such an event, faithful Jews also needed to pay their Temple tax. Now the Temple tax was required to maintain the Temple as well as to pay off the Romans for their quote-unquote protection. Ah, but you see, Roman and Greek coins couldn’t be accepted for this particular donation. Why? Because they frequently held the image of other gods or leaders presumed to themselves be god. Not a very kosher currency so the money of the pilgrims would have to be replaced with coins from Tyre – the preferred money of the Temple because they were of good weight and measure and all without an idolatrous image.

Now, had everyone been doing everything ethically, there probably wouldn’t have been much of an issue. Ah, but there were. Problems that are with both transactions.

First, while a flawless goat could be sold and purchased in your hometown for, let’s say, \$1. In the Temple courtyard, supply and demand being the forces they are, that same goat would cost \$16. And with the money as well. Let’s just say the exchange rate went precipitously downward the moment you walked into the Temple.

Now I don’t know if I necessarily buy the math that some scholars came up with, but in a piece written a few years back, two historians estimated that, during the Passover, the Temple treasury would’ve made the

equivalent of something on the order of \$400 million dollars. That's the money made off the money exchange as well as collected rents and dues from the merchants. So, needless to say, this was a really good business for the faithful.

I think we who've been here in the Charlotte area understand that this correlation between ethics and morality in the church hasn't quite been cleared up, at least not yet. I can remember years ago when Jim and Tammy Faye Baker's PTL group blew up with charges of financial impropriety. Do you remember how stunning it was to see such "righteous" people be exposed for doing some not-so-terribly-moral things?

And while that may have been what first opened our eyes, we continue to see people employ the church as the means to grow their own personal profit. We hear about pastors who demand Lear Gulfstream 2 jets, (\$21 million each) in order to effectively carry out their pastoral work. So too have we seen pastors purchase mega mansions, even here in the Charlotte area.

With book sales and television incomes, some pastors and church administrators' live lives as rich as Croesus. I myself have encountered pastors during my tenure within the church who lived well beyond the means of most of their congregants, well beyond the means of most Americans, really. A recent report offered that the median salary for a church worshipping in excess of 1,000 people is somewhere along the line of \$250,000.

And while it's easy to take issue with these people, after all, the Bible is really clear about not profiting richly from the work of the Word. And, don't get me wrong, but they're not the only ones to blame. They're not the only people Jesus is entering into the Temple to send out the door to rethink things.

It isn't just the temple money changes and merchants that are being called out – it's you and me, too.

Because, as it is said, it takes two to tango, right? If someone is selling, it's because someone is buying. Which came first, the chicken or the egg.

You see, things change. And while we might not like the change at first, generally, we get used to it and then, should that new normal ever be questioned, we are the first to defend its practice.

You see what galls Jesus isn't just that there is such rampant profiteering going on within the Temple that day, it's also that the people of God are so easily accepting of it.

I tell you what, a few years ago, there was a word being bandied about in the business lexicon that I was sure glad that ebbed a bit. The term was "disruptor." As the theory went, disruptors were the people who challenged the status quo of entire industries. Jeff Bezos, he was a disruptor, right? I mean everyone thought you needed to actually go to a store to buy things. Think again, Hello Amazon Prime. Disruptors also challenged the status quo in other areas as well. Do you remember the days in which if you wanted to know what a friend was up to, you either had to pick up a phone or write a letter? That was all until social media came out. Now, I can know what 40 people I've largely forgotten about are having for dinner tonight.

One of those disruptors' fond quotes was "Move fast and break things." The idea being that, when moving fast into new areas, you're bound to shake up the status quo. You'll inevitably "break things" when you change the parameters of expectation.

Jesus here I believe is working as a true disruptor. Into a church more comfortable with marketplace dynamics than the movement of the Holy Spirit, Jesus says, begone. To individuals merely going along with the status quo of their faith, he says, it's time to change.

And change, as it would turn out, always takes a change agent.

Now for those of you who don't know it, I'm a huge reader. And while I read a lot of different things, my go-to genre is historical fiction. One of my favorite authors in that genre is a man name of Ken Follett. Many of you might remember his earlier spy novels, the Eye of the Needle being one of them. But, somewhere along the way, he got into writing historical fiction. His book, "The Pillars of the Earth" is one of my favorites.

There, a young man of great faith but little practical experience becomes the Abbot of a dwindling monastery. It's a punishment, really but Prior Phillip doesn't see it as such. He spends his first several weeks just getting to know the individuals and practices of the priory. Then, having seen it's strengths and weaknesses, he begins to make changes.

Needless to say, these disruptions to the status quo, well, they're not all readily embraced. The thing about inertia is that, when it's disrupted, everyone knows because the entire system goes into a temporary shock. "What do you mean we're not doing it that way anymore?"

Churches all too easily slip away from doing a new thing and falling into a comfortable pattern. Pretty soon though, you're simply managing expectations. I'll never forget one of my first serious run-ins being a church pastor. The church I served did Lenten suppers. Every Wednesday during Lent, we'd gather in the Fellowship Hall for supper, then we'd have a Bible lesson following. Well, during the first year, I noticed that many people were still distracted by food while the lesson began. The second year I figured we'd mix things up. We'd have worship services which would require us to move from the Fellowship Hall into the Sanctuary. A no greater distance than it would be here.

I figured a change wouldn't be that big a deal.

Boy was I wrong. No kidding, the entire next year, people complained or kvetched to me about it. Now look was the change going to automatically make anyone pay more attention? Probably not. But was it a cause to go nuclear?

The Grateful Dead have a lyric that's always stuck with me – "When life looks like easy street, there is danger at your door." Never more so did it make sense than when, the next year, I relented. We'd do the Bible lesson in the Fellowship Hall.

Guess what? Fewer people came. My life was easier but at what cost?

And I can't help but believe a similar social dynamic took place years ago. What at first seemed like a novelty had become an institution in its own right. And, unfortunately, the money changers and the merchants were an unhelpful innovation. Sure, it made things simpler, but it came with its own weaknesses too. One of which surely being that it turned the Temple of God into an ordinary place of business. The sacred traded for the profane simply by the arrival of the status quo.

So, what does Jesus do?

Well, He calls it all into question in the most dramatic of means. Fashioning a whip made out of cords, he uses the weapon to drive out those unwelcome elements and practices that were taking place.

That's exactly what He calls His church to do. One of the reasons I'm a Presbyterian is that one of our key beliefs is designed to prevent that kind of creep into the church. We're called "The Reformed Church" because we believe that the church is reformed, that is purified from unnecessary things, and always reforming. Because we who control the church are ourselves fallen sinners, we too must place our practices and beliefs continually up to the Biblical standards of our faith.

How are we doing there?

Well, not so great if you asked me. As individuals, we've substituted the transforming of our minds into the need to be molycoddled. As a church denomination, it's frightening to think of just how many ways we baptize the sinful beliefs of an adulterous generation instead of preaching moral truth to an increasingly perverted power.

And, it should be noted, we wouldn't be the first within the people of God who needed such a reckoning.

We too need Jesus to come into our Temple and disrupt us just like we need His Church disrupted as well.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.