

Jesus Flipped a Table
John 2:13-22
Colebrook Congregational Church
March 8, 2015 – Third Sunday of Lent

My best friend at Divinity School was Juliet. She was type of person who, if you brought to a solemn happening, would cause you great worry, by hoping that you would not laugh when she leans over and says something completely inappropriate. Today's selection is her favorite story about Jesus. Whenever we saw something that was overblown or bombastic in some way, she would lean over to me and say, "What Would Jesus Do? I think he'd flip a few tables!" Sometimes she would accompany this with sound effects.

When you look at all four gospels, there are many similarities, but also a lot of differences. The early Christians did this on purpose, figuring that it would give readers a more whole picture of Jesus. The Gospel of John is the one with most of the differences. It is the more theological gospel of the four, the last to be written, and Jesus seems more aloof and at times cranky compared to the other Gospels. While Mark is always in a rush, describing Jesus ministry as only lasting a few months and how Jesus hid his true identity, John is more leisurely paced, describing a ministry lasting about three years, and has Jesus being a lot more open about who he is. And also, John took the important events of Jesus' life that the other gospels place near the end of his earthly life and placed them at the beginning of his ministry.

According to John, before Jesus cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem, he was at a Wedding in Cana, where Jesus performed his first miracle, turning water into wine. This story is unique to John's Gospel, and for John, is Jesus' coming out event.

Then, after a few days, Jesus heads to Jerusalem to the Temple, which was preparing for the Festival of Passover. Passover is one of the most important Jewish holidays, and is one of the three pilgrimage festivals, requiring the entire population to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem. Every family had to provide a young lamb or wild goat to be sacrificed at the Temple by the priests, while the Levites sang the Hallel, then the family roasted the offering, and had to eat all the meat before the next morning.

After the destruction of the Temple later by the Romans, this was replaced by the Passover Seder meal, consisting of six symbolic foods and a stack of matzos, that are used to tell the story of why Passover is celebrated. The book of Exodus tells us how God liberated the Hebrews by convincing the Egyptians to let them go after sending seven plagues upon them. The blood of the sacrificed lambs was used to mark the doorframes of Jewish homes so that the final plague would know which houses contained Hebrews and therefore will be passed over and be spared. And then, when they were free to go, they did not have time to let the yeast of their bread rise, so they had to eat their bread unleavened.

In Jesus' time, the Passover meal was close to the seder plate, but without as many components. It was primarily the sacrificed meat, matzos, and bitter herbs. And to John, who described Jesus celebrating three Passovers, it is a later Passover, the last one that Jesus had with his disciples, is the basis for Communion. Bones had to be kept intact for Passover, so Jesus could not symbolically use the meat as being his body being broken for us, and thankfully, Jesus did not choose the bitter herbs either!

Anyway, this is a very important Jewish holiday, and when Jesus went to the Temple and saw how the outer courtyard had been turned into a marketplace, he let loose with righteous anger. Jesus cleansing the Temple is depicted in all four gospels, and is the only account of Jesus using physical force in the Gospels. It is out of character for Jesus to use physical force. Everything else we know about Jesus, shows him to be peaceful and nonviolent, and that he preached what he practiced.

I look at this episode as a demonstration of Jesus' humanity. That even Jesus lost his temper once. Jesus the human is just like all of us, with our human imperfections. And also that we should act when we see something that should not be. He probably could not have convinced them with words alone to vacate the Temple, and his behavior may have been the least violent way to cleanse the Temple, considering. I am not advocating whipping with cords or flipping tables, but some degree of indignation with wickedness, in some form, is sometimes required.

During my senior year in college, I worked as the News & Photo Editor of the student newspaper. One Friday night, a student working in the Security Office informed our staff that Security had confiscated all public copies of the paper. I ran to our office and found that rest of the copies there, and the master copy disks, were missing. No official would speak to us. I knew that there was an Open House the next day, so I organized our reporters to hold signs outside the student center, asking where the paper was and why they were taken, but early enough in the day that we weren't going to be seen by the prospective students, but close enough to provoke a response from Administration. We got one. I was told by the Dean of Admissions that if we dispersed, he would try to find out what happened. Later, he told me that he couldn't get any information. So our staff went into high gear, we knocked on the door of every dorm room with petitions, and luckily, most of the professors just happened to be on campus that weekend. I learned later that the administration had hoped to make the papers disappear for the weekend and return them by Sunday night before anyone noticed. Instead, by Monday morning, we had the students agitated, the student government and professors demanding an explanation, local news crews on campus, and a story had gone out on the AP Wire.

The Staff saw an injustice: censorship. And we took a stand, responding by causing a ruckus, but a measured one. We were careful about what we did and how far we went. We called them out for censoring us, but we did not risk the potential incoming class of students, nor did we spark a riot or other destructive disturbance.

Jesus saw something that disrespected the House of God, and he reacted. But Jesus did not do any lasting harm in his violent action. No one died. Cows were whipped, birds released, and money spilled off tables that he flipped over. This was inconsistent with his usual behavior, but it could have been worse. Jesus saw an injustice and reacted and took a stand. We should ask ourselves, How do I respond to injustices? And how can I take a stand?

Amen

Prayers of the People

[PAUSE]

Faithful God of love, you blessed us with your servant Son so that we might know how to serve your people with justice and with mercy. We gather the needs of ourselves and others, and offer them to you in faith and love, seeking to be strengthened to meet them.

We pray for our world, and for everyone in it. We pray for peace; and for the safety of all who are in harm's way. We pray for our defenders and first responders, thankful for their service. We pray for health and comfort for all who are unwell. We pray for full bellies for all who are hungry. And we pray for warmth and shelter for all who left in the cold.

We especially pray for:

O God, shape us and transform us by your grace, that we may grow in wisdom and in confidence, never faltering until we have done all that you desire to bring your realm of shalom to fulfillment. Amen.