

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

“When Words Aren’t Enough”

It's the part of the back and forth question and answer every teacher, babysitter and parent hates to reach. Later we regret we eventually had to resort to short and concise "final words." You know the words I'm talking about. When our educational conversation ceases to be one and deteriorates into "Why not?" "Because I said so!" "But why..." "I said no!" We all know saying "no" or "because I said so" falls short of the kind of communication we really want to have with our children or youth. We only get to this point after trying to explain our reasoning and rationale for denying a request or laying down some rules. But we've all done it at some point or another.

In John's gospel it appears that Jesus has skipped the teaching conversation entirely. He went right for the "Because I said so!" He goes to the temple in Jerusalem for Passover as one making a pilgrimage. But Jesus didn't like what he saw when he arrived and decided immediate change was in order. This is not counselor Jesus, buddy Jesus or inspirational Jesus. Here, we meet enraged and indignant Jesus. He doesn't seem interested in working the system and negotiating with the chief priest for institutional change. No. "Making a whip of cords" which I guess were lying around, he proved himself a shepherd of his day by driving out the sheep and the cattle. He also upset the tables of the money-changers. When he finally spoke, it was to the dove owners. "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!" Finally the on-looking crowd gets a clue to his outrageous behavior.

Now the disciples somewhat get what is going on. They link his statement to "zeal for God's house." But the authorities of the temple are bewildered by this wild man standing in front of them. It was Passover and because of Jesus, righteous Jews were not going to be able to offer the sacrifices they had traveled to Jerusalem to make before God. The authorities could have booted him out right away. Instead they ask Jesus, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" They have a point and are pretty calm considering what has just taken place. Temple trade was necessary to maintain the cultic system of sacrifices and tithes. Jesus was challenging the authority of the temple in its worship as he drove out the animals to be sacrificed, and the necessary money changers to procure acceptable coins to offer a tithe to God.

"What sign can you show us for doing this?" John portrays Jesus leaping ahead to the end of his gospel in his answer, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." By temple, Jesus meant his own body. His words were like an unsolved riddle.

They had no idea he was talking about himself. Of course they thought he was talking about the temple they all stood in.

All four gospels relate this story to their readers. John is unique though. He puts this story up front in the second chapter of his gospel while the others place it in Jesus' final visit to Jerusalem the week of his death. In John, Jesus threatens the existing beliefs about God's presence from the Gospel's beginning. John portrays Jesus as knowing that his words, his teachings, his showing forth God's presence in him through his life won't be enough. It would take more to break the cycle of sin and death for humanity.

Angry at the cultic system which he felt bound and made captives of the people, Jesus confronts it head on. New Testament scholar Marcus Borg in his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* makes a compelling case for Jesus' ministry as a confrontation with this vast purity system. He points to the profound implications of the purity system: "...the effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile." Just before Jesus went to Jerusalem to cleanse the temple, he was at the wedding party in Cana where he changed the water of the purity jugs into wine. Right away, John shows Jesus engaging in acts that break boundaries through transforming material substance.¹

As we witness these acts and realize who Jesus is our perceptions of how God is at work in the world change. God's presence in Jesus is alarming because it shatters the validity of empty cultic deeds and routines when they become rote and heartless. Jesus calls out "grow in faith." Only in faith can we enter into the risk of dying and rising with Christ to all that would bind us. Faith gives us the security to lose ourselves to find what God really intends for our lives.

The scandal of this passage to the temple authorities is the authority Jesus claims for himself through his words and actions. "What sign can you show us for doing this?" they ask. The mood of Jesus changes somewhat here at this question. John portrays him as knowing that righteous indignation won't be enough to reform the chasm between humanity and God. Self-giving love, self-emptying love, the kind that leads to the cross would finally be needed. The story of the cleansing of the temple moves to the death and resurrection of Jesus. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Jesus has the authority to challenge the temple system because he is God's presence on earth. Instead of the presence of God confined to the innermost chamber of the temple, God's presence is manifest in flesh and blood to challenge us and to break sin's hold over our lives.

Jesus' actions and teachings will ultimately bring about his death. We can see why the authorities were displeased with him since their first encounter. His whip of cords and righteous indignation challenge a religious system that has honored God in the past, but now is so imbedded in its rules and practices that it is no longer open to a revelation from God. This temptation, to maintain the church and the status quo, exists for contemporary Christianity just as it did for the Judaism of Jesus day. His challenge of the religious system of his day highlights our hesitancy to hear his message. Like the authorities who thought he was talking about the physical temple they were standing in, we often miss the message right in front of us—or we choose to ignore it.

Lent is a time for self and communal reflection. So what about us today? What would Jesus bust in to this sanctuary to drive out? Perhaps our rigidity in beliefs of what

debates the church should or shouldn't engage in? Our resistance to opening ourselves to live into new life? Maybe what some of us need is for Jesus to drive out our self-doubt or hate, consumerist tendencies, or our petty bickering. Every religious system we have, even the most faithful out there, falls short of God's ideal for our individual and common welfare. Each fails to fully honor God. Even as we strive to live the practices Jesus taught, we must rely on our faith in God's grace to reform us and sustain our living.

When we stand in our old ways and challenge God's new revelations to us today, why does God put up with us? Why did Jesus let himself be taken to death on the cross? Why does the Holy Spirit abide with us? Because God has promised not to be God without us. Because God loves. First in the covenants with Israel and then in life with God offered through faith in Jesus, we can claim with full assurance that we along with all creation are God's beloved. When words weren't enough to reconcile us, God in Jesus suffered and triumphed over the ultimate human experience of alienation--conquering death and sin forever. Amen.

¹ "It's Not About Bingo" The Rev. Barbara K. Lundblad, March 2, 1997, *Day 1*.