

"Making a Scene"

Ex. 20:1-17; Ps. 19; John 2:13-22

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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Churches often have pictures of Jesus on the walls. There's the "Laughing Jesus", Jesus with the little children, Jesus holding a lamb, Jesus walking on the water, Jesus praying in Gethsemane.

I'm guessing that most churches don't have a prominent picture of Jesus on the day he got angry, made a whip and started driving out the money changers and the animal sellers. It might be in a picture Bible, but probably not on the wall as you enter the sanctuary.

This story of an angry Jesus is unsettling. It is uncomfortable. It runs counter to the picture of the gentle, non-violent Jesus we've come to know and love.

Henry Guest captured the scene in his poem titled, "The Cleansing":

"A pallid spring sun shone on the forecourt.  
Inside the building it was dim and stuffy  
and people came and went about their business.

Suddenly we saw light gather to itself.  
A human shape, fused from another April,  
entered our temple like a shaft of fire.

The shadows burned away. Stark radiance  
pushing from floor to rafters  
dazzled the traders.

The man made all of light  
hurled trestles down so the money rolled glittering,  
smashed wicker cages so the captive doves  
flew whirring through blue clouds of incense.

He swept like a meteor with scourge and flame  
condemning us who'd turned the place for prayer  
into a space for robbery and bargaining.

He left, and it was as though the day had been withdrawn.  
We stared at the wreckage in the new noon dusk  
the shattered furniture, the litter of tarnished coins.

Someone said, 'Who was that?'  
There was a frightened pause.  
Another answered. 'He's called the Prince of Peace.'"

This is not the Jesus we are used to, but it is a picture of Jesus that is captured by all 4 Gospel writers. And, whenever a story is found in all four gospels we should take special notice. Each in their own way and their own style give us an account of an angry Jesus. It caught their attention, as it should ours.

The four gospel writers differ on when it happened: Matthew, Mark and Luke place this event in Holy Week, just days before the crucifixion. It is one more thing to add to the long list of reasons why the religious authorities are anxious to get rid of him.

By contrast, John places it at the start of Jesus' ministry, several years before the events of Holy Week. But still this episode functions as a trigger for the crucifixion.

Such a scene got everyone's attention, as it was meant to do. And it gets our attention too.

When someone is angry we pay attention, especially when it isn't how they usually behave. Anger is often a good sign of what we care about. When we see something on the news or in the paper and we get churned up inside because it "just isn't right", that's good. It isn't good that it happened, but the fact that we are able to be moved to indignation and outrage and anger should tell us that maybe our moral compass isn't entirely on the fritz.

But although our moral compass may be intact it doesn't always steer us in the same course that Jesus was moved to pursue on that day. Most of us, myself included, prefer to fly under the radar. We don't usually like to make waves or act up and do things that may call attention to us. As a result we often put up with quite a bit.

Business as usual, whether in the marketplace or in politics or in the church, becomes business as usual because it is allowed to continue, regardless of whether it is sound, or fair, or right.

Jesus was not against institutional religion. He attended the synagogue. He honored the teachings of the Torah. But he objected to anything that located the presence of God in a building or in a sacrificial system instead of in the spirits and hearts of the people of the community of faith.

And he wasn't alone in this outrage. He is standing squarely in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets who railed against the abuse of the poor, against worship that had no connection to the heart, and thinking that saying the right prayers and offering up the right sacrifice would make one "right" with God.

Jesus knew that true worship involved honesty before God, a willingness to own up to who we are, a broken and contrite heart and humility of spirit - - these were the necessary qualities. They belonged right alongside a sense of solemn joy in God's presence and thanksgiving for God's grace and mercy.

Instead, the Temple worship had the trappings of business, buying and selling, changing money so that the "right" money could be used to buy the "right" animals for sacrifice. Was it to help out pilgrims arriving in town or was it to take advantage of them? With Jesus' actions, we get a pretty clear answer.

Jesus was upset by the profiteering and economic injustice of the Temple, but even more, it seems he was outraged by the way in which the Temple had become an end in itself, rather than the means by which worshippers could enter into closer communion with God. It had become an idol, if you will.

Here is where an important link is forged between this event in the Temple and the giving of the 10 commandments in Exodus. The commandments point back to God and our relationship with our Lord and also our relationship with one another. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me", "Thou shalt not make any idols", "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy", "Thou shalt not steal", "Thou shalt not bear false witness," ... These commands ring out loud and clear, but they had gotten drowned out by all the noise of the money changers and the animals in the courtyards of the Temple.

The 10 commandments call us to a right relationship with God and neighbors, but this call was being obliterated in the attitudes and

practices Jesus witnessed that day. This kind of "business as usual" could not continue.

It's ironic or perhaps it is fitting that this story takes place at the time of the Passover, that annual remembrance of how God had freed the people from bondage in Egypt and led them with a mighty and outstretched hand through the Red Sea, through the wilderness wanderings and into the Promised Land.

Now, once again, God in Christ will lead the people to freedom. Jesus will point the people back to God by pointing to himself and the new temple of his own body. Jesus will lead them to a new day of new worship and a new focus upon the things of God and not the trappings around the temple.

Jesus himself becomes the Temple and the center of our life together as worshipping people of God. Jesus himself becomes the Passover Lamb, the sign of salvation for God's people.

The worship of God can be a joyful thanksgiving for the freedom won for us in Christ. It can involve a broken and contrite heart, a desire to follow faithfully, and a willingness to make room at the table for all God's people.

With his holy anger Jesus puts us on notice that "business as usual" in our religious life cannot continue. It won't be a question of following the right ritual and making sure the sacrificial animal is without blemish and purchased with "Temple-approved" money.

The quality of the relationship one has with God and with one's neighbors will become paramount. Because, if this story of Jesus in the Temple does nothing else, it should remind us that worship matters

to Jesus and making it possible for all God's people to worship in spirit and in truth is important to Jesus. If it is important to Jesus, shouldn't it be important to us, too?

As this Lenten season continues to unfold let's not be indifferent to how we approach God in worship and how we relate to one another. Let's keep an eye out for those in need of special grace and care and let's not be afraid to consider whether our religious practices and our spiritual disciplines are setting us free to have an encounter with God or helping to guarantee that we will never let God get any closer than arm's length.

Maybe having a picture of this scene on the wall of the church isn't such a bad idea after all. Maybe it would serve as a reminder that what we do here is important because it matters to God.

And the One whom we worship and call Lord wants to get our attention and remind us to have no other gods, no other idols, nothing that gets in the way of loving God with our whole heart and mind and strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves: today, and every day.

Amen.

Pictures of Jesus - gentle, non-violent. Not this one.

"The Cleansing."

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Not used to this Jesus. BUT IN ALL 4 Gospels.

Anger can be good. Moral Compass. BUT DO WE ACT?  
Jesus and the prophets, Right worship! No idolatry!

Jesus points us back to God. To right relationship.  
With his anger, Jesus shows us what is important. What matters.

Maybe it can be important to us and lead us to RIGHT RELAT.  
To Love God with all our heart and soul. And Neighbor as self.