

John 2:13-25

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple, he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² 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.

²³ When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

Maybe you noticed that John places this story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, while the other gospels place it at the end. How can this be? John sometimes uses a different chronology than the other gospels for the sake of his theology. He does this because he wants to emphasize the meaning of things. In this case, he wants to show that the animosity between Jesus and the Jewish leaders started at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Here is where the leadership decides they must do away with him.

The other gospels present it as the final event that Jesus performs that prompts the leaders to plan to destroy him.

Now to the story.

So, Jesus and the disciples arrive for the Passover festival. Passover is a holiday with a past, present, and future dimension. Just as God acted to liberate us from slavery in the past, freeing the enslaved people of Israel from Egypt, God will act in the present and the future.

Not only was it a religious holiday, but it was also a political holiday as it dealt with pharaohs and emperors in the past and present. Because God had liberated the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, there was hope for God's rescue from the current Roman occupation. This feeling was in the air and was palpable, and the Roman and Jewish authorities knew it and felt it. Thus, there were extra troops to suppress any incident that might lead to who knows what kind of disturbance or uprising.

Into this environment, Jesus arrives with his disciples. And he gets angry.

I felt anger stirred within me when I read this passage. Maybe that is a proper response as Jesus gets angry in this passage as he cleans house!

So why do I get angry? It happens at this time every year and other times but most intensely around Lent and Holy Week. I get angry at unreflective pastors, teachers, and scholars who read the passages from the last week of Jesus' life and say the Jews did this, and the Jews did that. The Jews falsely accused Jesus, the Jews mocked him, and the Jews beat him and sent him to Pilate to be executed, or some go as far as to say the Jews killed Jesus.

This is wrong because it is just the Jewish authorities, like the high priests and their entourage, who by the way, were not at all popular with almost all the Jewish people. Better translations and scholarship make that point clearly that it was not the Jews but their leadership, many of whom were appointed by the Romans who opposed Jesus.

All it would take on their part is a little study and a little sensitivity to the impact of their words, as well as the reminder that Jesus and his band and people like Paul and Peter and James, who were vital figures in the early church, were all Jews.

This issue is compounded because John does have hostility to the Jews even though Jesus and the disciples and his followers were mostly Jews. John is projecting back from his time onto Jesus' time.

By the time John writes, the Romans had destroyed the temple. What had once been Jews who followed Jesus and Jews who didn't but still Jews divided to form into different camps, and people who followed Jesus were being expelled from the synagogue and no longer considered Jews. This great historic Jewish faith was now divided.

So, when we read John, we need to keep these things in mind. And many who should know better don't.

This passage and others like it helped shape the anti-Jewish rhetoric that fueled such hate and evil through the ages. Such passages lead to the terror and atrocities of the holocaust and, from there, plays into the chants and actions of the alt-right and Christian Nationalism marching and shouting, "The Jews will not replace us," as they gather.

These anti-Jewish sentiments come to a high point each year during holy week when the most significant number of antisemitic acts are perpetrated in our country. Unreflective preaching, teaching, and scholarship play into this.

I am aware that I am more sensitive to this because I was raised Jewish. Even though I did not suffer significantly for being Jewish, there were microaggressions, exclusions, Jew jokes, and expressions like "he Jewed me out of this" or "I Jewed him down" that caused discomfort. It makes me sensitive to the power of words to hurt, and I will admit I am not home yet.

As I said, I was raised Jewish and still consider myself Jewish in so many ways, so I am a Jew who follows Jesus.

So, that's what makes me angry when I read this passage. What made Jesus angry?

Jesus gets enraged as he enters the temple courts. What is Jesus so angry about? He shouts that they have made his Father's House a marketplace. It can't be the buying, selling, and money changing that bother him. These were essential services. These folks were performing a necessary service for the vast number of pilgrims arriving in Jerusalem, as it had five times as many people during the

festival. They needed to purchase appropriate animals for sacrifice because traveling great distances with animals for sacrifice was just impractical.

The money changers were vital, too. Pilgrims could change their coins for the appropriate ones for the temple tax that would not have the emperor's image. They might have something like Tiberas, son of the Divine Augustus. Those coins broke the commandment about making images of God or committing blasphemy. So, coins without images of people or claims for divinity were exchanged for the appropriate temple coins.

There was no indication of exploitation or price gouging. The market provided a needed service for a city bursting at the seams with pilgrims. Indeed, there were so many that they even enlarged the city boundaries to include the Mount of Olives because the Passover had to be celebrated according to Jewish law only in Jerusalem.

So, what enraged Jesus?

When I started ministry, I thought maybe this was about all the fundraisers and dinners churches held. But I soon learned that it had nothing to do with that. It was much more severe than a craft bazaar or roast beef dinner. So, what was it then that angered him so?

As I mentioned last week, location is important. This marketplace was located on the temple grounds on the court of the Gentiles, where non-Jews came to worship God. The market used to be on the Mount of Olives but was moved to the court of the Gentiles so that the temple authorities could better control what was happening.

I think this is what angered Jesus because the market was interfering with the Worship of God by the Gentiles, whom the prophets said would come to the temple to worship God.

So, Jesus sees what is going on and, in a rare outburst of anger, disrupts the whole market as he topples tables and scatters people and animals. This is a side of Jesus we have not seen before to this extent. Can you recall Jesus ever losing his temper like this? My college Professor, Dr. Richard Batey, said we needed to notice that Jesus did not strike the people as he “cleaned house.”

I like the phrase “cleaned house;” it seems like an apt image for Lent as we seek to aggressively remove obstacles that tend to separate us from loving and worshiping God, loving our neighbor, and following Jesus. I think that is what is at the heart of this passage. Jesus disrupts a whole system that is preventing folks from worshiping God.

Moreover, how does it feel that peaceful-loving Jesus seems to lose it? I say it seems because I think Jesus' anger was controlled. Jesus has gotten angry before at demons and things that put roadblocks in front of people seeking to come to God, but to my memory, this is the only time he acts on his anger in such a physical way. He was taking prophetic action as the Messiah to protest the disrespect paid to the Gentiles and obstructing their access to God.

I get it. There are some things we need to be angry about. When powerful people and systems arrange themselves in such a way as to exclude the people we ought to be angry with, it's righteous and prophetic anger. But, like Jesus, it needs to be a controlled burn.

To be sure, it is not the same road rage, that self-righteous anger that gets us riled up when someone cuts us off, pulls in front of us, or steals our parking place. It is not that flash or outburst of uncontrolled emotion. Righteous anger comes when we feel something is wrong and have the strong desire to correct the wrong and take action to right the wrong.

When I used to play at the Olean Bridge Club, I sometimes got angry with my opponents. It was not about how they played or what they said to me, but if I thought they were rude or mean to my partner, I could feel my anger bubbling. I kept it in, but I discovered my anger often got triggered when people were mean, disrespectful, or hurtful to others. That helps me understand Jesus' anger when he saw the Court of the Gentiles being obstructed.

Even today, we can feel Jesus' anger when we observe those people and systems that wound others personally and socially, especially the most vulnerable. The Bible terms them the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant. It is the righteous cry for justice and compassion. It is the demand that the love of our neighbor be actualized in our lives, the lives of others, and the world. That fired up Jesus' soul to act and should also fire ours.

I don't think it is a call for us to act destructively because even Jesus only did it once. And we are not Jesus. But it calls us to work for justice and inclusion for all people.

What would Jesus do in this regard when he visits us? He would call us to account for how we have built a place of worship with access for all people. And he would ask what barriers you have erected.

We could answer as a church that we are not perfect in this area; certainly not, but who is? However, we try to consciously work at doing things so that people will feel welcome to come and worship God, and we try not to put any obstacles in their way.

We are not there yet, and things change and get more complicated every day, but when we say all are welcome, we say it with love and sincerity and do our best to put it into action. As we journey through Lent, please ponder how we might be more welcoming to all, and if you have ideas, please bring them forward to help us become more and more welcoming in Jesus' name.