

13 It was nearly time for the Jewish Passover, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 He found in the temple those who were selling cattle, sheep, and doves, as well as those involved in exchanging currency sitting there. 15 He made a whip from ropes and chased them all out of the temple, including the cattle and the sheep. He scattered the coins and overturned the tables of those who exchanged currency. 16 He said to the dove sellers, “Get these things out of here! Don’t make my Father’s house a place of business.” 17 His disciples remembered that it is written, Passion for your house consumes me.

18 Then the Jewish leaders asked him, “By what authority are you doing these things? What miraculous sign will you show us?”

19 Jesus answered, “Destroy this temple and in three days I’ll raise it up.”

20 The Jewish leaders replied, “It took forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?” 21 But the temple Jesus was talking about was his body.

22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

23 While Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, many believed in his name because they saw the miraculous signs that he did. 24 But Jesus didn’t trust himself to them because he knew all people. 25 He didn’t need anyone to tell him about human nature, for he knew what human nature was. (Common English Bible)

I suggested last week that we ought to pay attention to the ways that Jesus is portrayed in the Gospel of John. Last week we saw him as both a reluctant son and a quiet miracle worker; this week we see him as a grand disrupter. I once heard someone say that Jesus is the question to all your answers. And this certainly seems to be an apt way to describe the Jesus we’re meeting this week.

The story of Jesus turning over the tables in the temple is a story that’s found in all four Gospels; there are just a few of those— the feeding of the 5,000, the crucifixion of Jesus, and this one. But in the other three Gospels, those synoptic Gospels, the ones that follow a similar storyline, seem to share sources, and are best read together... in the other three Gospels this story takes place at the END of Jesus’ ministry. It is, in fact, a key trigger for his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. He was threatening the religious establishment, disturbing the powers that be, interrupting commerce, probably stirring up crowds... he had to be stopped. But here, in John, it is the second act of his ministry. It happens at the beginning of his ministry. The fact that a VERY similar incident shows up in all four Gospels lends some credulity to the idea that something like this actually happened. But scholars have long debated about the matter of the timing of this incident— did it happen twice? Once at the beginning

of his ministry and once at the end? Probably not, most think. So are the synoptics right, did it happen at the end of his ministry? There's good reason to think yes it did. But then again, an argument can be made for the earlier timing.

It's important to remember, when we're reading the Gospels, that we're not reading biographies of Jesus— not reliable representations of the facts of his birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection, by the standards of modern history that is— rather, they are literary and theological works designed to teach truths about the God revealed in and by Jesus. And they take the memories of his life and ministry and arrange them in particular ways to convey particular messages to particular communities for whom these Gospels, these books of Good News about Jesus, were written. And all of the Gospels were written long after Jesus lived, died, and was resurrected— they are all looking back on his life through the lens of the miracle at its end.

The Gospel of John was the last Gospel to be written and it is, in many ways, the most literary of the bunch. And it is clear, even in the second chapter, that John is telling this story through a resurrection lens— he adds theological commentary to the story to suggest that Jesus' words in the temple that day were words about his death and resurrection, the grandest disruption of all, words that could only be understood by his disciples after these events occurred. Did you notice that? At the beginning we're hearing about the end. And to come back to the question of the timing of this table turning... The likelihood is that it happened later in his ministry... The statement Jesus makes about destroying the temple and him rebuilding it in 3 days... that statement appears in the other Gospels in his trial and in accusations hurled at him on the cross. It is part of the charges brought against him at his end.

But we're focusing on the Gospel of John this year, and regardless of when it happened in Jesus' ministry, he decides to portray this dramatic scene in the temple as one of the first events of his ministry. And I take that to mean that the author of John understands it to communicate something important about Jesus, something that needs to be understood about him. And John also intensifies the scene a bit, relative to other tellings of it. Only in John does Jesus make a whip and use it to drive out not just large animals— animals that don't even appear in the other Gospels— but

also, it seems, their sellers. In all the Gospels he turns over the table of money changers, and shoos away people selling birds for sacrifices, but here he uses a whip. Jesus, the grand disrupter.

As John tells it, Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. We can imagine that that is something he did year after year all throughout his life. And going to the temple as part of this Jerusalem journey was surely part of the experience every year. Particularly during a time of religious festival there was likely always a lot of hubbub on the temple grounds— always lots of money being changed (people came in from all over) and always lots of ritual purchases being made. He had surely experienced it all before. But now Jesus' ministry has begun. It was set in motion quietly at the wedding in Cana thanks to a nudge from his mother about which we heard last week. And though everything is the same at the temple, things are not the same in Jesus. And now what he finds at the temple is intolerable to him. So intolerable he fashions a whip and drives people and animals out, he knocks over tables and sends money flying, he shouts. His ministry started with a quiet sign that allowed a party to continue in style. It went public with a loud disruption that indicated that his arrival meant that things had to change. And I'm sure that his outburst was insufferable to those who had a lot invested in the way things were.

But why? What was wrong with what was going on in the temple? I'm not sure, particularly on the basis of the way John tells the story, that the problem was with corruption in temple practices— I think it more likely that Jesus was displeased with the big picture of the way the people of Israel were living out their faith in God, their failures in love and justice. Jesus' act in the temple that day, whenever that day was, resonates with the words of the prophets from whom we read in the last few months— do you remember the words from the fifth chapter of Amos?

21 I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. 23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. 24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

One blogger suggests that, “Jesus’ actions recapitulate Amos’ words 700 years later. Both are saying that **if God has to choose between worship and justice, then God chooses justice.** God does not want to make this choice, but God’s preference is clear.” Jesus was seeking to disrupt a system that supported inequity and injustice. That blogger continues, “A question for us today is whether we are willing to take the same risks that Jesus took to seek not only individual change, but also institutional change. This shift is both vital and risky. As Dom Helder Camara said, ‘**When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.**’

“In moving *from* inclusive table fellowship *to* action against the Temple, Jesus shifted *from* the controversial (but more acceptable) practice of eating with others across diverse socioeconomic boundaries *to confronting the institutional system that create and entrench unequal and unjust socioeconomic boundaries in the first place.*”

With the turning of the tables, Jesus issues a challenge to religious practice that does not include the pursuit of justice, to systems, even religious systems, that sustain injustice. Systems yet persist that sustain injustice and we, as people of faith, continue to need periodic disruption to shake us up and call us back to the heart of worship— following Jesus in his ways of justice, mercy, and unconditional love.

It is striking to me, that at each of the moments this passage has come before us over the past 8 years, it has been a moment of great cultural disruption. Have we been in a sustained experience of cultural disruption for my entire tenure with you? So much injustice is on plain display before us still. Now, masked, armed people on the streets of our own country. Innocent people detained, deported, and even killed by the state. The distribution of wealth in our country leaves nearly half our population with nothing. Wars and rumors of wars abound. Last week a family of 6 showed up at church with an eviction notice in hand. The husband is out of work because his boss was picked up by ICE. They have not been able to pay rent for two months. Your deacons and elders have been working all week to see if we can pay their back rent and find other ways to support the family moving forward. And indeed I think this will happen. When some of us (and that would be most of us) have more

than we need while others have far less that is a situation of injustice. And thanks be to God, we as a church are responding to share what we have to support an extremely vulnerable family. Jesus knows human nature, the end of our reading tells us, and he knows we're prone to devolution that starves the world of justice. We know that we live in a world that is hungry for justice, desperate for mercy... and if we have to participate in divine disruption, turn over the old and embrace something new, from time to time, so be it.

Several commentaries informed the writing of this sermon. The blog cited in this sermon can be found at: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2012/03/occupychurch-jesus-threw-out-the-moneylenders-for-a-reason-a-progressive-christian-lectionary-commentary-on-john-2-for-march-11/>