

Exodus 20:1-17 ~ John 2:13-22
Again & Again: We are Shown the Way
 Third Sunday in Lent ~ March 7, 2021 ~ Communion Meditation
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Introduction to Second Scripture:

Are you looking for a sign? A clear arrow in the sky pointing the way, or at least a warning light that flashes when you veer off course? If you like signs, then John is your gospel. Yes, we are jumping over to John from Mark and will stay with John all the way until Easter. So, settle in and buckle your seatbelts folks, we're going to take a ride into the land of signs and metaphors. The more you look, the more you see. Plenty of juicy gospel truth here for all of us.

John begins today's story by painting the backdrop with two quick, vivid strokes. The when and the where: it's nearly Passover, and we're in Jerusalem. It doesn't get any holier than that. The holiest time of the year, the holiest place on earth. And here comes Jesus about to make a ruckus in the Temple, the holiest building in the holiest place, during the holiest time. This Passover is the first of the three that Jesus celebrates in John.

Yes, we are right at the outset of Jesus' ministry. The other three gospel writers place this event at the other end of his earthly life--on Monday of holy week, right after Jesus final entrance into Jerusalem that we call "Palm Sunday." But not John. Remember, John is all about the signs, and instead John pairs this incident with Jesus' first sign, changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana. We are told this miracle, this first sign "revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him." (John 2:11)

In today's story that picks up at v. 13, You will hear the Jewish leaders in the Temple ask Jesus to show them a sign. It wasn't wine this time. But it did point the way, a sign that would point them from a building to the building of a relationship: the very core of their faith tradition and ours. Let's have a look and a listen in this reading of God's holy word. (Read Text)

Communion Meditation:

"Mamma, Joe said a bad word today." This was something Isabel, our almost three-year-old granddaughter, announced in a *very* serious tone to our daughter Emily, early one evening a couple of weeks ago. Isabel attends a wonderful home daycare run by a married couple, Lori and Joe, where they have been caring for about eight babies and toddlers now for over twenty years. Emily told me she was thinking, "well spending all day inside with eight toddlers because it's way too cold to take them outside... not *too* surprising that a bad word just might slip out." So, she asks Isabel, "What did Joe say? What was the bad word?" Isabel reported, "He told us to *clean up our toys!*"

Nobody really likes to clean up their toys, do they? Or their lives, for that matter. Whether we are three or seventy-three, we'd rather just keep making the same messes, thank you. Don't mess with us. Our status quo, no matter how bad it may be, has a weight and a rhythm that resists upending. That's another reason why we need to go to church every week.

The moves we make in worship invite us to clean up our toys, to look up and to listen so that God can get us back on track with God's way. And so that, God will empower us to change the status quo.

This aspect of worship may surprise you. If you think about it, our weekly liturgy creates an inroad for us to see, to reconsider, and to choose again an alternate world to the one we have just lived in for the past week. Our worship starts with praising God, we kick things off with a Call to Worship and an opening hymn of praise. What an incredible way of getting our minds off ourselves! These opening pieces remind us that our lives are rooted in a reference point *other* than ourselves. Now that's a relief, isn't it?

Next, we have the confession of sin: a chance to acknowledge how we have strayed or run as fast as we could, from God's ways of loving God and neighbor. We can do this because we know that forgiveness is on tap here. That everything can be forgiven. Where else does that happen? God wants it to happen here. And it can happen if we are honest. As Theologian and author, Walter Brueggemann has written, "The church doesn't need to be the happiest place in town. The church needs to be the most honest place in town. Out of such honesty, happiness arises. There is nothing more emancipatory then being able to tell the truth in a safe place."¹

Today, as we celebrate Holy Communion, we get to come to the Table of Grace, where we are free to let God upend what other gods, what other tables we have refused to clean up. People we cannot forgive. Grudges we cannot let go of. Jesus will turn those over for us, if we let him. Cleanse us, remake us. At this Table we can bring all of our losses, all of our messes. At this table: Christ will enlighten and embolden us to take on the systemic sins of our time. That day in the Temple, Jesus was protesting the ways the Temple as an institution had strayed from the Ten Best Ways to Live. He saw the ways they had started to try to commodify the core of God way, where love of God and Neighbor reigned supreme. We get this message loud and in John's telling, "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up!"

With sheep and cattle baa-ing and moo-ing their way out of the Temple, coins flying, and tables crashing, we can see what Jesus is showing them and us. Whenever the institution strays from the core Message on which it is built, I Jesus, am here to upset that status quo. I am here to realign the institution into line with the very reason for its existence: bricks and mortar in service of righteousness and justice. John makes the leap for us: Jesus' body is the Temple. Just as Torah, beginning with the Ten Words, or Ten Commandments was and is the core of God's covenant people. Just as the prophet before him, Zechariah (14:21) had decried already about 500 years earlier. Physical temples are built and destroyed, but God's word, God covenant remains.

For us, for Christ followers, the sign of Jesus' body was given to us at this Table. Here we are given the antidote to our losses: the bread and the wine. Bread for the journey toward wholeness. Wine for the journey toward forgiveness, and the grace to go on. The Bread of Life to give us courage to go on record fighting against all the ways our ways go against God's way. Do you think Jesus really cares about the biochemistry of what actually happens to the bread and wine, or who is not allowed at the Table? If Jesus came to church, the way he came to the

Temple that day, I believe he would have overturned the tables of our Christian traditions that have become too dogma-driven and too oriented toward who's in and who's out. Jesus came to change hearts and change the world. Jesus came to make us into a new community, where Love Divine reigns supreme. And anything less, anything that get in the way of that, gets a shove from Jesus.

Even some of the Christian tradition around this Bible story of Jesus overturning the tables would get a shove! This story has been misused by Christians who have interpreted Jesus' words to mean he was condemning his own faith. This is something he did not do. Any anti-Jewish reading of this story is a misreading that Jesus would overturn. Recently this story has been coopted by some on the political right and on the political left to justify violence as a Jesus' sanctioned method of protest. This was not the point of the story, nor an accurate reading of his factions. No animals or people were hurt in this story. This interpretation is also a false misreading.

What is a true reading that offer us a lesson closer to the heart of Jesus' action in the Temple? I hear Jesus asking us this question: What parts of the status quo in your personal life and in our life as a church, as a nation needs cleansing or reversing, or redirecting? Especially in this season of Lent, the season of spiritual spring cleaning and decluttering, I hear us being called to ask this hard question and to wait for the answer. Even if it is a word or a task we don't want to hear. Or a word that is hard to hear.

I remember getting quite angry with my mom when I was doing a definitely half-baked job one Saturday, dusting all those darn crevices in the dining room chairs, and mom took a look at what I was doing and asked, "Laurie, what if Jesus were coming to dinner here. Would you be dusting the way you are right now?" I was about 13 at the time and I remember my smart-alecky self, thinking, "Jesus wouldn't care about the dusting, didn't he say that Mary, the one *not* doing the chores, had chosen the better part?" But I did not want to get into any more trouble than I was already in.

And, of course, she was right. God wants our whole self (no other gods, no idols) in all that we do. God does not want us just going through the motions whether it is dusting at home or worshipping at church. Jesus is going for zeal. We all have zeal of one kind or another: but in which direction are we employing it? If you're not sure, notice what you get worked up about. Would Jesus share your ire or not? We can see in this story what Jesus got worked up about. Christ is decisive, direct, and dramatic. He disturbs the false peace of the status quo, because he loves God. The problems, the Goliaths we face: whether it's cleaning up, inoculating our world against COVID-19, or cleaning up our criminal justice system, protecting every citizen' sacred voting rights, or the host of other gnarly issues our nation is facing--Jesus says, bring it on! I am with you in your efforts to overturn the tables of injustice wherever you can.

Joe did not really use a bad word that day at Izzy's day care. Just because it is a word or task we don't want or would rather not do, doesn't make it a bad word. He actually used a good word. The good word of invitation to clean up. And yes, in that invitation from Jesus is the call to

confront the status quo, wherever it falls short or contradicts the way of God. Jesus awaits us, eagerly, at this Table of Grace.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann and Clover Reuter Beal, *An On-Going Imagination: A Conversation about Scripture, Faith, and the Thickness of Relationship*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2019) pp. 92, see also 94-98, the ideas about worship were inspired by these pages.