

## Rebuilding Community

I am continuing with this sermon format of combining a discussion about our purpose statement with our lent theme of hungering for hope. Last week we talked about our Anabaptist understanding of life and scripture. We discussed how we are in a community that focuses on action, and views Jesus as the centre of scripture. We discussed Jesus' message of death and rebirth, and how we can embody that in our day to day lives to truly keep Jesus at the centre. Today we are talking about the final phrase of our statement of purpose which reads **“We strive to nurture faith and discipleship, committing ourselves individually and corporately to respond to the needs of others.”** In our hungering for hope lent material we are looking at embodying beauty, and John 2 where Jesus flips the money changer's tables. There are three main issues in this text that are very difficult to understand. There is potential and history of this passage contributing to Anti Jewish rhetoric. The placement of this story differing from its placement in the other gospels raises questions. And Jesus' actions leave us pondering if this is violence or not. As always when we encounter points of contention or differences of interpretation there are multiple ways of looking at the text. I have my own bias and leanings. What I say is not an objective truth, it is just a presentation of how. If you see things differently that is okay and you can come tell me how you interpret it.

### 1. Potential for Anti Semitic Interpretations

This action by Jesus is theologically significant, but also needs to be handled with care, because passages such as this in John's gospel have fueled anti-Jewish rhetoric. According to Gail O' Day, this is largely down to what we focus on within the passage. While there were some abuses done by the temple, as with most large institutions, the actual practice of money changing and selling animals at the temple was necessary. We often focus on the idea that the temple was corrupt, because people were overcharging for personal gain. While such folks may have existed, there is not strong evidence of this, and the text certainly does not make that argument. The service of changing money and selling sacrifices was bred out of a necessity for such business. If people wanted to come from afar and

participate in Passover, buying animals and changing money on site made sense. Jesus' clearing of the temple was much bigger than calling out some practices within. Jesus has come to dismantle the authority of the temple, regardless of the nature of the business being conducted.

Christian interpretations that see this story principally as an illustration of the extortionist practices of the Jewish temple authorities disregard these realities of temple worship in Jesus' day (this is referring to the reality that people needed to purchase animals and needed to change money). There were inevitable abuses of the temple system, but in vv. 14-16 Jesus confronts the system itself, not simply its abuses. (O' Day)

While in scholarship there is some contention about whether the merchants were exploiting the poor and marking up prices, the fact remains that Jesus was going to protest against the temple, and advocate moving Judaism away from temple based worship and faith. All of this is to say that we should avoid using this passage to preach a Christian superiority, and focus on the radical message of Jesus. That radical message being that faithful following, is not defined by a location. "Jesus is the locus of God's presence on earth, and God as known in Jesus, not the Temple, should be the focal point of cultic activity". (O' Day) Here cultic is just to refer to religious practice, and is not calling our faith a cult, just to clarify. The point being is that Jesus' message is that he is the temple, he is the centre of following and worship.

## 2. Puzzling Placement of the Event

The second point of difficulty in this story is its placement in John's gospel. In the three other gospels, Jesus clears the temple after his triumphal entry, and this action is a key contributor to his execution. While some scholars and pastors conclude that John's placement of the story means that Jesus performed the same action twice (which is a fine belief to have), many others believe that John is less focused on chronology and more focused on painting a picture of Jesus. This is backed up by the fact

that John's gospel is full of things not present in the other gospels, and lacks many elements present in all three other gospels. This does not take away from the truth of the text, it just means John is potentially rearranging the story to highlight the points he wishes to make. If the biblical authors used each other's material, or witnessed the same things, any difference in storytelling should alert us that something important is happening. If the author of John moved this story, why would they do that? It is not unusual for the Gospel of John to use symbolism to make different points.

John moves the temple scene to the beginning of his Gospel because it serves a symbolic function for him. The temple cleansing in John completes the inaugural event begun with the Cana miracle. John 2:1-11 revealed the grace and glory of Jesus and the abundant new life Jesus offers. John 2:13-22 highlights the challenge and threat that new life poses to the existing order. (O' Day)

Another scholar, Willard M Swartley believes that John placed this story at the start of his gospel, in order to set the tone and theme for the rest of the book. Many believe that John wrote his gospel in response to the temple destruction in approximately 70 AD (Swartley, 97). "If so, the Gospel's theology accentuates how believers understand Jewish religious practices in light of Jesus' becoming the new temple" (Swartley, 97). If Jesus cleared the temple only once, and if John moved this event, it was to set the course of the rest of the book. To teach what it means if Jesus is the new centre of faith, and show the chaos that a shift like this creates. Jesus brings new life, but that sometimes looks more like a temple clearing, than a nice miracle. John's gospel continues in this manner, focusing on the theological implications of Jesus, while the synoptic Gospels focus more on the historical implications of Jesus.

### 3. Is this violence from Jesus?

While the early church seemed to land where we as Mennonites do, believing this to be an act of nonviolent protest against the temple, 3 centuries onwards, Augustine started a shift in thinking and this passage was used to justify violence (Swartley, 100). Willard M Swartley believes

this is a nonviolent protest, because Jesus did not use the whip on humans, using it only appropriately on animals. Though as a yuppie who does not engage in farm life, I still get sad about that idea, but I know that is common practice for corralling animals. Swartley has a few points that back up his claim that Jesus did not use the whip on humans.

- 1) While it does say *he drove all of them out of the temple*, in the immediate aftermath he has a conversation with the dove sellers. He has not driven the humans out, and we can assume that the previous all corresponds to the later *both the sheep and the cattle*.
- 2) If Jesus had used the whip on humans it is very unlikely authorities would not have immediately intervened, and we know this is not the case because he continued to preach in Jerusalem (Swartley, 100).

So those are three difficult parts of the text. It's unpleasant usage, peculiar placement, and potential for advocating violence.

I think that at its core, this passage is emblematic of the start of Jesus' movement. When Jesus identifies himself as the new temple he starts something wonderful. The Gentiles are not relegated to a temple court. Those who cannot travel are no longer cut off from the presence of God. A religious epicentre has some positives, like creating consistencies in teaching, but it also leads to exclusion. There are so many people shut off from the temple if it is a physical location. There were laws about people with certain ailments and backgrounds entering the temple. But even beyond that, how would someone who cannot walk or see even get access to the temple? How can people from out of travelling range from God's temple feel included, if they are never able to visit a place deemed as central to their faith. With Jesus being the new temple, wherever Jesus, is where people can experience the presence of God. What Jesus does in the temple clearing, is begin the process of taking on the role of temple, in a way that welcomes all of humanity. So that all have access to the goodness of God.

The theology that comes with Jesus clearing the temple helps inform our final sentence in our statement of purpose. **“We strive to nurture faith and discipleship, committing ourselves individually and corporately to respond to the needs of others.”**

Jesus clearing the temple means that God's presence follows us, and I think because Jesus was focused on engaging with those around him, this presence is particularly with us when we are in community. Our job as followers is to carry on the task of bringing God's presence to people in the world. And that is where this final part of our purpose statement comes in.

We strive to nurture faith as a church by coming together and sharing our thoughts and experiences, hoping that we can benefit from hearing from one another. We read scripture together and sing together to inspire ourselves to pursue Jesus in our day to day lives. That is where discipleship comes in. We don't just try and grow great spiritual lives for ourselves by working together. Our coming together doesn't just foster an internal faith. It also inspires us to live and act differently. We aren't trying to find an undiscovered spiritual truth to reach a new level- we are trying to build up our faith, so that we can be disciples. We want to find ways of being like Jesus. I think that this part of our statement of faith reflects that there is both an internal, and external element to our faith. When we come together and hear from one another, it helps us develop a healthy internal spirituality. When we come together, and seek guidance for how to live, it helps us find ways of living out our faith. We do this individually, and corporately. We have individual relationships with the world around us, and we have relationships as a whole community with the world around us. A good phrase for understanding this is found numerous times in the gospels where Jesus is called a friend to sinners. We can ask ourselves am I friend to: Lonely people? Hurt people? People different from me? And then is our church a friend to: The environment? Indigenous people? Marginalised communities? There are countless other groups to add to this list.

The final phrase is "to respond to the needs of others". That is one of the most important parts. Jesus routinely spoke out about putting religious piety before helping one another. This is a theme that can be seen in the prophets as well. Chris spoke about Isaiah 58:6 on our first Sunday of lent. "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?"

Amos 5:22-24 says

Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,

I will have no regard for them.

23 Away with the noise of your songs!

I will not listen to the music of your harps.

24 But let justice roll on like a river,

righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Jesus clearing the temple is important to us as believers. Jesus became the temple of God, and called believers to join him in that calling. We try to nurture a faith that takes action by gathering together. We want to hear from one another, so we can be empowered to make a difference. We work as individuals and as a community to respond to the needs of others. We are not immune to the same pitfalls folks had when Jesus cleared the temple. Tradition, ritual, and practices of devotion are crucial to our spirituality. But if we do not pause every once and examine if we are responding to the needs of others, we can fall into a comfortable rhythm. Jesus cleared the temple, which was eventually destroyed, so that something beautiful could be built in its place. A beautiful community that was more inclusive, less bound by worldly constraints, and focused on the here and now as well as the future. What needs to be torn down in our lives to make space for something beautiful? Do we need to destroy certain assumptions that prevent us from helping people different from us? Do we ever put our quest to be spiritual before the needs of our neighbour? May we continue to nurture faith and discipleship, committing ourselves individually and corporately to respond to the needs of others.

**Benediction:** Rest in Jesus. Rest in the beauty of creation. Rest in knowing that you are loved and that Jesus has made space for you in the temple courts.

**Works Cited**

O' Day, Gail R. *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*. VIII, Abingdon Press, 2015.

Swartley, Willard, M. *John: Believers Church Bible Commentary*. Herald Press, 2013