

Cleaning House

Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22

If we compare the placement of the cleansing of the temple in the four gospels, there is a definite difference. According to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus was in Jerusalem for Passover once, where he cleansed the temple shortly before his arrest and death. Not so for John. The cleansing of the temple in this gospel takes place in chapter two, just after he performed his first miracle in Cana turning water into wine, long before his final meal with his closest friends.

The newly-called disciples get a glimpse of an angry, unyielding Jesus who speaks truth to power from the onset of his ministry. No gentle, lamb-carrying Savior here. I wonder if the whip-of-cords, table-turning Jesus frightened or thrilled them.

I admit that a part of me pumps my fist at the thought of Jesus giving those making God's house a marketplace what they have coming to them. You show them, Jesus! God's house is not a ritual Wal-Mart. Religious festivals are not about blow-up yard art, over-the-top gift-giving, chocolate bunnies or expensive new clothes. Give 'em what for, Jesus! Put God back in Passover! I want to channel the temple-cleansing Jesus every time I hear of churches fighting about the color of the carpet, or blessing guns, or closing their doors to the poor, or announcing that some tragedy is a result of a community's sin. The house of God cannot be co-opted for our human purposes and our propensity for greed, exploitation and self-righteousness. Crack the whip, Jesus!

The problem, of course, with this line of thinking is that in every scenario listed above I am on the handle-end of the whip. I am helping Jesus turn over the tables of others, pouring out those sinners' coins and holding up the sign that indicts those who desecrate God's house. In short, I cast myself as Jesus – not disciple, not wrong-hearted religious leader, not wrong-headed purveyor of doves. Whenever I want to cast myself in the role that can only be occupied by the Son of God, I need to stop, drop and repent. I need to repeat until I believe it: I. AM. NOT. JESUS.

I am not one with the Father as Jesus is one. I am not the temple that will be destroyed and raised in three days. I am not seated at the right hand of the Father, judge of the quick and the dead. On any given occasion I am a disciple, a Pharisee and/or a defiler of the holy. On every given occasion, I am a sinner, always in need of table-turning Jesus to come and set me right.

The temptation to use this text to justify our righteous indignation is strong. I want Jesus to set straight those I deem in the wrong. In order to not give into that temptation, I must first recognize the ways I have sullied God's dwelling places in sanctuary, self and in the world.

Lent demands that we examine how we have desecrated the divine by selling out the Holy Spirit through the sacrificial dove trade. How have we used the temple as a means of personal profit rather than a place of worship? When have we wrapped our preferences in

the packaging of the faith, instead of examining our practices through the lens of Jesus Christ? What have we placed ahead of God?

As soon as we want to grab the whip of cords from Jesus' hand, we need to stop, drop and repent because, odds are, we are no less in need of radical purification and reorientation than the ones we wish to condemn. We need to cleanse our own house before we start cleansing others.

This Gospel lesson from John is coupled with Exodus 20:1-17: the Ten Commandments. Note the "I am" and "you shall" and "you shall not" language. "I am the Lord your God ... you shall have no other gods before me." "I am the Lord your God ... you shall not make for yourself an idol." You shall remember the Sabbath and honor your father and mother. The covenant sets out the relationship, the order, the responsibilities. Worship of God comes first and any practice that disorders that priority creates the occasion for Jesus to come and turn the tables on us. Do we need to examine God's place in our lives?

Before we cheer on Jesus as he goes to town on those who make God's house a marketplace or give in to the temptation to cast ourselves as Jesus, we need to ask for the Spirit's intercession and intervention so we might get our own house in order, personally and corporately. How do you spend your time? Your money? What gives you joy?

Bryan Stevenson, the Harvard-trained public defense lawyer, author of "[*Just Mercy*](#)" and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative was recently interviewed for [*Pacific Standard Magazine*](#). Stevenson talks about the need to get in proximity to have a lasting and meaningful impact for good. He says he sees many people who "feel very comfortable challenging other people and holding other people accountable." But he goes on to add, "I think it's necessary that it be disconnected from a sense of privilege because too often people who are willing to participate in a sit-in or to engage in counter-protests or to participate in a demonstration are not willing to actually serve the poor. They're not willing to pursue a career that creates proximity to the systems we are so provoked by. And I want to make sure that we understand that what you do for a couple of hours is not going to negate what you do for a lifetime, if what you do for a lifetime is adding to the problem."

It feels so good to crack the whip and turn the tables and rail against those who get religion so wrong. But doing so has no lasting impact on that which provokes us if we are unwilling to see how we are contributing to the defacing of the divine in our own lives and houses of worship. We must draw to and ferret out whatever exists within and around us that transforms dwelling places of the holy into spaces uninhabitable for God.

We must remember as we do that Jesus doesn't crack the whip and move on, he returns to Jerusalem for yet another Passover: the one where the temple of his body will be destroyed, giving his life so that the tables will be turned forever and finally on sin and death. Forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption and resurrection are coming for wrong-hearted, wrong-headed, dove-selling sinners.

That includes us all! Amen.