



“Jesus Came to Disrupt”

Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg

March 4, 2018

John 2:13-25

My daughters have figured out that doing extra chores can get you paid. As members of our family, my girls are expected to do daily tasks like cleaning up their toys in the playroom, putting their clothes in the dirty clothes bin, making their bed, and cleaning their room. However, they have recently become master negotiators and somehow bargained with us so that they can do extra chores for cash. Needing all the help we can get to keep our house clean and tidy, we indulged their request. They now load the dishwasher for ten cents, clean off and organize the dining room table for twenty-five cents, fold their own laundry for thirty cents. These girls have cleaning our house down to a lucrative science.

And, fortunately for our girls, the house always needs cleaning. There is always something for them to do. They constantly get their sponges, their mops, and their brooms and find something to clean. And on this third Sunday of Lent, we see that cleaning was on Jesus’s mind as well. The title of the lectionary reading this week is “Jesus cleansing the temple.” And as we ponder this story, we think about in these Lenten weeks how we have some cleaning up to do in our lives. The temple of our lives might be polluted with too much social media, or not enough prayer, or too much anger, or not enough justice. Lent disrupts our lives so that we can find the places where we need to dump and scatter the coins of greed, whip and chase away the animals of hostility, and fiercely turn over tables of complacency.

And so, today, we join Jesus when he did some spring cleaning. It was time for the annual Passover celebration, so Jesus traveled to Jerusalem like he probably did every year as a good Jew. And when he arrived in Jerusalem, Jesus went straight to the temple. When he got to the place of holiness and worship, he saw the buying and selling going on and that caused the spirit of disruption to begin coursing through his veins. The newly baptized Jesus, the Jesus who had received the Spirit of God that had disrupted his own life, had a plan to change the temple, the dwelling place of God. No longer would it be a place where exclusion happened and price gouging happened and marketplace selling happened. No longer would pilgrims and peasants have to spend a year’s salary to get the perfect unblemished animal. No longer would the house of the Lord be a flea market or shopping mall. No more. Jesus came to disrupt the system and change where God chose to dwell. The religious world would be different and Jesus was going to change it.

But the reason Jesus wanted to disrupt the religious structures of the day were different in the Synoptic Gospels than it was in John. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the cleansing of the temple story happened in the last year of Jesus’s ministry and initiated his arrest and execution. But in John, the cleansing of the Temple happened at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry, right after his first miracle of turning water into wine. Jesus’s mission all along was to disrupt the religious

system and structure and show the world that he was the new dwelling place of God. And this Incarnate Word walked in with a whip of cords, all Indiana Jones style, ready to administer some disruptive justice. And Jesus occupied the Temple because the people in charge had lost the script and were perpetuating injustice and forgot that the God of all people resided in this Temple. Jesus was not only speaking truth to power, he was demonstrating it powerfully. Confrontationally. Directly. Disruptively.

So why was Jesus so disruptive? Because the Temple had become an exclusionary enterprise ruled by the governing elite and had distanced itself from the people of God. The Temple was a massive, expansive, and exclusionary place. As scholar Amy Jill-Levine writes: “The Temple itself consisted of areas of increasing holiness. Outermost was the court of the Gentiles, which anyone could enter. Proceeding farther in, one reached the court of the (Jewish) women, the court of the (Jewish) men, and finally the holy of holies - entered only by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. Participation in the Temple was open to everyone: women could make offerings, as Jesus’ account of the widow’s mite clearly indicate(s).”

All in all, the Temple seemed to be welcoming to everyone. Also, the merchants and money changes weren’t breaking any laws. But Jesus embodied a new divine indwelling, the inclusive indwelling of God where the Temple had failed. You see, the Temple was not a place for all people. The Holy of Holies, the most interior of the Temple where God resided was entered by only one male priest one day of the year. And the next level out was the Court of Israel where all the religiously observant and ritually clean men were allowed to enter and witness the slaughter of the sacrificial animals. And then there was a wall that separated the men from the Court of Women. And then there was another wall separating the Jews from the Court of Gentiles. And it was there, in the Court of the Gentiles, where anyone was welcome, no matter who you were or where you came from or what you believed. And that is where the money changers and animal sellers were taking advantage of the poor pilgrims and making it impossible for the Gentiles to worship. And the wall separating the Gentiles from the Court of Israel, according to scholars, was inscribed with a warning that any Gentiles that entered would be killed. This wall as called the wall of hostility. So, God was at the center, and only certain people could come close to God.

Steve Chalke, a British Baptist minister argues, “In this way the Temple functioned as a gigantic filtration system — an exclusion machine that mirrored Jewish society under the boot of the priests and Pharisees. The Temple-cleansing story — Jesus battling against the unfair and unjust regime of the day — is really all about God’s rejection of, and anger at, this exclusion.” And our text today reminds us of God’s radical call to inclusion. Jesus came to tear down the walls that separated people from God and from each other. And because of this inclusion, the chief priests, the authorities, and all those in power plotted to destroy Jesus – to find him, arrest him, and have him killed. Jesus tore down the “dividing wall of hostility” and truly called us all to be one, together, no matter who we are or where we come from.

In C.S. Lewis’s book *The Lion, the Witch, and The Wardrobe* there is a scene where the children are being told about Aslan – the character who represents Jesus. When the children learn that Aslan is a lion, they become frightened. “A lion? Oh my! Is he safe?” “Safe? Who said anything about safe?” comes the reply. “Of course, he isn’t safe. But he’s good.”

And that is Jesus in our text for today. Jesus never promised that following him would be safe. In fact, he's pretty upfront about the difficulties involved. There's nothing particularly safe about Jesus. And Lent is not a time of safety. Lent is a time of disruption when our procedures, our patterns, our plans are disrupted. Jesus illustrates for us that no institution of injustice is impervious to his power and might and disruption. He represents the fulfillment of justice, love, and peace against the hate and war that is constantly perpetuated by the governments, the powers, and the principalities of this world. God's indwelling in us reveals the inclusive and pervasive love of the divine and the creation of a new system and commerce within us.

Which means, as we travel through Lent, the disruptive Jesus will enter our temples and say to us, "Do we sell ourselves short? Do we buy into what the world is telling us? Have we set up the tables of pride and self-reliance in our lives?" Jesus is angry and wants us to tear those things down! Jesus has come and it is time for the traders to leave. It is time for the animals to leave. It is time for the money changers to leave. The Lord has come. Jesus is the temple and we are following him now, even to the cross. But like we said last week, the cross isn't the end. Jesus will rise from the dead and the place we see the Lord working is in one another and not a divisive and exclusive temple. If the Temple couldn't contain God then we can be assured that the grave cannot hold God either.

It's time to "spring clean" with Jesus during Lent. It's time to see if the system we have set up for ourselves is helping us or hurting us. It's so easy to believe what the religious authorities tell us is the price of admission, the cost of worshipping God. But Jesus changes all of that. No longer are we beholden to an old system. No longer are we dedicated to an old building. No, Jesus is the new temple that was consumed, torn down, and rebuilt in three days. And today, we are the temple of God in the world here and now. In Lent, it is time to get our house in order and for us to proclaim the power and purpose of God and for us to be cleaned-out temples, only focusing on the inclusive worship of God. Jesus chases out of us all the guilt about how we could've done something better, all the pain of rejection and worry, all the shame of not fitting in or doing it right. Jesus disrupts us with a true sacrifice, himself.

Richard Rohr believes that, "When God is seen as 'outside,' the sacrificial system will remain. However, when God moves inside, you are the temple and sacrifice is no longer required. The only sacrifice now, is me."

As we make our way through Lent, the only sacrifices we should be concerned about are ourselves. Our old structures, habits, and temples are being torn down and the Spirit of God has chosen to dwell within our lives. And if that is true, I wonder where, in our lives, would Jesus like to turn over some tables and disrupt our usual way of doing things. Where are the walls of hostility around our church? What are our sacred cows that we need to chase from the courtyard? How can we be the body of Christ to the broken, the hopeless, the hurting, and the wounded? Where should the tables be tipped, and the ordinary upended? It's time for some spring cleaning church. It is Lent and Jesus has come to disrupt this temple.

Amen.