

Tearing Down the Temple

Jesus's call for the end of faith as we know it

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Text: *John 2:13-22*

Lent 3B | March 8, 2015

Mad Jesus

Here's what we know. Jesus walks into the Temple in Jerusalem, brandishes a cattle whip, and proceeds to drive out the livestock, the people selling the livestock, the money changers, and the dove-sellers. He pours out the cash and flips over the tables. Jesus makes a holy mess of the most holy place of worship. If this action doesn't scandalize you, then let's name it more specifically.

What if we did what a colleague of mine suggests and imagine the newspaper coverage. We open *The Jerusalem Post* the next day or turn on cable news that night and imagine what we would read and see. *Vandalism at the Temple. Deranged man attacks dozens with a whip. The main economic system grinds to a halt. Thousands of worshippers, making their pilgrimage for the high holy day are inconvenienced by a closed Temple.*

And don't forget the he-said/she-said. *Some are saying that this is an unprecedented attack on the Temple. Daring to call it an act of domestic terrorism. Others, like our guest, Joshua, are calling him a vigilante hero.*

In the end, Jesus would easily be branded the goat in our media environment. But that doesn't even touch what is truly controversial about this action.

Trouble at the Temple

We need to remember what the Temple actually represents. Those who have dived into religious history know that the Hebrew people, the Children of Israel, had a love/hate relationship with the Temple, at Jesus's time, going back to its *first* construction, 1,000 years earlier. This Temple is the second, having seen the first one destroyed about 600 years earlier.

Their understanding of the Temple is built around the teachings in the Torah around sacrifice, and the need to make regular sacrifices, and specific sacrifices, particularly at the festivals.

The Torah lays out the way these sacrifices are to take place, and the roles different people, particularly the priests, play in the people's sacrifices. Strikingly, in the midst of these descriptions, the Torah accounts for people of different means and their abilities to sacrifice. If you can't afford the livestock, then buy two doves or pigeons. If you can't afford doves, then bring a sack of flour. The system was set up to make sure everyone is able to participate.

This is the Temple sacrifice system in a nutshell. People do stuff locally, but come to Jerusalem, to the Temple during the big festivals. This is not only outlined in scripture, but central to their understanding of ritual purity and maintaining their faith.

One of the things that drives Jesus nuts in scripture is when the system, meant to protect people, becomes a barrier or a stumbling block to them. Provisions, meant to build up relationships and protect the poor and the minority, are used to separate, rather than unite, or worse: are used as an excuse to deny participation.

This story only happens if things are wrong. Jesus doesn't get mad and drive out the people running the show if everything is going the way GOD intends. He doesn't get whipped up into a frenzy if the poor aren't being denied service or aren't being gouged by rip-off artists trying to take advantage of all the tourists in town for the festival.

This story, which appears in the other three gospel stories at the beginning of Holy Week, is a profound critique of how the Temple is used by its leadership, in what Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan call a Symbolic Act. It is a visual story, told with actions to evoke what words cannot, then paired with a teaching. A teaching about himself.

“This Isn't Working”

This symbolic act is hard on us, because it isn't completely clear what Jesus is *truly* after. And I'm certain we all have mixed feelings about acts of disruption. I thought of this story three years ago during the Occupy Wall Street protests and many bankers were complaining about having to step off of the sidewalk to get to work and shopkeepers having too much business at times they're usually slow. It is much easier for us to criminalize inconvenience than it is to accommodate disruption.

This internal conflict is the space Jesus wants the people to go to. He disrupts them in a way that makes everyone uncomfortable, including his defenders. But why?

I think it has to do with the teaching about the destruction of the Temple. He says

"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

which certainly would have been heard like a terrorist threat, and in the other gospel stories, actually **was** taken for one: it was one of the things that got him arrested.

Jesus's choice of words, *destroy **this temple*** directs us to see him as talking about himself. Destroy **me** and I will come back. Now, to his detractors, who actually did catch that argument, this would be just as threatening: blasphemous.

To us, though, it sends us in a different direction. Perhaps to a shift of priority, to a shift of focus from the Temple sacrificial system and toward a worship of togetherness, of eating as a group, and a faith without such strict ties to a human-exploited institutional system. To us, we'd say it isn't about the Temple, but about Jesus.

Now, Jesus isn't pushing us toward a churchless faith, a religionless spirituality, or independent devotion. Jesus doesn't attack the institution **because it is an institution** but because the leadership of the existing institution is **corrupt**. Because **how they understand scripture** is corrupt. Because the way **they govern people's behaviour** is corrupt.

He directs the priority shift upon himself while also saying to the people **this thing you're doing isn't working!**

Something Bigger Than We Are

Last week I preached (to the dedicated few) about having to break bad news. That there are many things in the church we avoid talking about. One of the important pieces of bad news we refuse to talk about is the 20th Century's dramatic shifts in society and our inability to face the source of the church's struggles, instead focusing only on our performance. We might find ourselves like those dove-sellers in the Temple, being driven against our will out of the institution we have sworn to protect: the institution we have given such good work to.

Or we might feel like the onlookers, simply coming to the Temple for our ritual sacrifice, our weekly meal, without heavy investment in *the system per se*, but in the act of devotion.

But what Jesus offers us, directing the focus on him, is to say this building is not the vehicle of faith. This is not what is required to get good with GOD. For just as Isaiah wrote that these sacrifices are an abomination to GOD, that this isn't what makes GOD happy. Us, we, the people, doing our work and offering of ourselves, building our relationship with GOD and one another, **that** is what GOD loves.

The institutions that go against this command, that put the institution's health **above** relationship will die and fall away. But in Jesus, the Body of Christ will rise again. The promise of the gospel is that it is **way bigger** than the institution, and far more powerful. It isn't about maintenance and keeping the lights on, it is about being and becoming; it is about loving and living in community; it is about serving and making Christ known to one another. That is how Jesus lives.

This Lent, may we take this Holy Week text as a reminder that our work is not individualistic **or** institutional. That we don't come to this walk of faith as a solo journey or that we place our dedication to **this** church above our work for **our** GOD. But instead, we work on behalf of the kingdom, building one another up, helping the people around us love and serve and give. May we join with others in life-affirming and *challenging* ways. May we see this as our holy work, not to defend some institution, even one that has lived a long, long, 175-years-long life, but to embody what GOD has been trying to do for Terre Haute for those 175 years: make the kingdom come.