

“The Most Disturbing Story in Scripture”

John 2:13-22

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There was a lot of anger in that New York **courtroom** last Thursday. This was the day that financier Bernard Madoff pleaded guilty to eleven counts of defrauding investors and bilking them out of almost sixty-five billion dollars. Security was high since the authorities anticipated the anger and potential danger. Even Madoff wore a bullet proof vest into the courtroom.

One of his victims was allowed to address the court and started walking toward Madoff, demanding that he look at him. The judge told this person to back away, but not before Madoff glanced his way. The anger from just one of Madoff’s victims filled that courtroom and created a tense situation.

There was a lot of anger in the temple **courtyard** the day that Jesus arrived to observe Passover. At least Jesus was angry and before he left, everyone knew it.

He did something that was uncharacteristic of him, or at least our impression of him. He made a scene. He overturned the tables of the money changers and drove out the merchants selling animals for sacrifices. In no way does this remind us of the “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” about whom Charles Wesley wrote.

What provoked his rot-hot anger? I think Jesus was upset because he saw people coming to the temple that did not find what they needed, and “it was this conflict,” Marcus Borg writes, “between purity codes and compassion that shaped his ministry.”

What did the people need? They needed what people have always needed from their faith: compassion, community and a way to connect with the Holy. It appears that these people had to work hard to find any of these. **Why?**

The temple was under the control of people who were less concerned about others’ welfare and more about their own. This is not to say that all the religious leaders were corrupt. Many were sincere and conscientious. However, those in power were more intent on telling people what they had to have to enter the temple than asking what they needed. This included the money changers and merchants selling animals for sacrifices.

Since mandatory temple taxes could not be paid with secular coins that had a human image on them, money had to be exchanged for approved currency, kosher coins of the purest silver from the city of Tyre. I don’t believe it was the exchange of money that Jesus objected to as much as the exorbitant exchange rate people were charged. As Tom Ehrich observed, “The money changers were exploiting pilgrims coming to celebrate Passover at a moment of vulnerability.”

Worshippers also had to offer animal sacrifices as part of the Passover celebration. How interesting it was that inspectors frequently found flaws in the animals pilgrims brought from home but knew where unblemished animals could be bought, for a high price, of course.

When Jesus entered the temple that day, he saw what was happening. Compassion, community and God had been pushed out by greed and corruption. Believers were helpless victims of religious racketeers that sucked the last coin out of their pockets while on their way to worship. What Jesus witnessed could not be ignored. Someone had to do something about it and he knew it.

So what did Jesus do? He overturned the tables of the money changers and scattered their coins. He fashioned some reeds and cords into a whip and drove the animals and the merchants selling them out of the courtyard. To those who sold doves, the animal of choice for the poorest peasants, he said, “Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!” John 2:16.

I must tell you that this story disturbs me more than any in scripture. This is because it revolves around conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders in the temple. Since I am a religious leader, it compels me to ask some questions.

What would Jesus say to me if he came to a church I pastor? How would he react to what he would see on a typical Sunday in our church? I've thought of this on more than one occasion.

I think the gospel writers thought about it a lot, too. All four of them included it in their biographies of Jesus, although John was the only one that placed it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry rather than the end. He used it to introduce his readers to Jesus and frame his ministry, whereas the synoptic writers used it to reveal the religious authorities' contempt for Jesus and the final reason for crucifying him.

How are we to use this story today? How does it speak to us? I believe there are two messages we need to hear. One is to individual worshippers and the other is to the church.

Jesus cares for you and, just as he knew what the worshipers in his time needed, he knows what you need. I may not know nor does the person next to you, but Jesus does. Your welfare is of great concern to him.

He knows what makes your heart ache and how painful it is. He knows what you are worried about and how much sleep you have lost. He knows what temptation is nipping at your heels and how difficult it is for you to resist. He knows who it is in your family that you are most concerned about and how troubling it is for you. He knows what questions and doubts are attacking your faith and how crippling they are. He knows about the heavy loads you are carrying and how tired you have become. He knows how devastating guilt is and how you yearn to be forgiven. He knows how hard it is to make ends meet in a severe recession, especially if you have lost your job.

He is ready to listen and respond to your pleas for help if you will unburden your heart and talk to him. I strongly encourage you to do that.

There is a message in this story for the **church**, too. There is nothing we do that is more important than creating community. The church needs to be a place where people find acceptance, unconditional love, forgiveness, encouragement and hope. It needs to be a safe place to fall, where wounds are bandaged and strength is renewed.

About once a month, I have coffee with a friend that is quite different from me. He is an African-American minister. He is thirty years younger than I am and runs in circles I never will. I grew up in a rural, county-seat southern town and he grew up in Philadelphia. I was reared in a home with both parents, much like all my friends. The divorce rate in his neighborhood was 100%. He had no friends that had a father in the home.

We talk church and culture when we get together. He helps me see the world beyond my borders. The picture he paints is not pretty.

"Do you know Atlanta has one of the highest rates of sex trafficking in the world?" he asks me. He encounters boys, girls and women who have been or are sex slaves and tells me what their lives are like.

"Do you know what middle age women are struggling with at an alarming rate?" he inquires. "It is eating disorders. No longer is this just a young person's problem."

"Do you have any idea what young people are doing to release stress and pressure in their lives?" I winced as he told me.

"Bob, the world outside our walls is hurting so badly and people are lonely, confused and depressed. What is the church's response?"

I think I know why Jesus overturned the tables and threw out the greedy merchants and money changers. The people running the temple were not doing their job.

See why this story disturbs me so much?

