

“Out of Character”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22

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For the next three Sundays, the lectionary Gospel moves from Mark to John, with his distinct style. This morning’s familiar lesson of Jesus cleansing the temple is recorded in all four Gospels, yet John alone places it near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, just after the call of the disciples and his first miracle at the wedding in Cana. Matthew, Mark and Luke set the event just after Jesus’ Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem. That John’s Gospel has Jesus going to Jerusalem for three separate Passovers allows him some flexibility, and is often the basis by which we measure Jesus’ ministry as three years in length. Yet, gospel writers are not all that different from other writers in terms of setting a theme or tone as they begin their writings.

John’s Gospel has an ongoing series of “asides” for the reader. They are like footnotes, or those times in a play, and now in some television programs, where an actor comes to the edge of the stage to offer a comment to the audience. I particularly recall when he tells the reader about Judas being a thief. After the water into wine wedding miracle, John tells us the disciples believe in Jesus. In this morning’s reading, after Jesus cleanses the temple and declares to the temple authorities he could raise a destroyed temple in three days, John tells us the disciples remembered those words after Jesus’ own resurrection.

The account of Jesus overturning tables in the temple sticks in people’s minds. I suppose that might be because, as we would say today, “It is so out of character!” Yet, just when such a suggestion leaves our lips, we realize we are using our own characterization of Jesus. We are wise to revisit the scene, with new eyes and ears.

Before hearing the lesson, let us review the temple practice Jesus is about to disrupt. Passover was the big feast day of the year for Jews, with many making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the celebration. Sacrificial animal offerings were part of the festival. Under what we would call a progressive structure, the rich would present a large animal such as a cow or sheep, while the poor could offer a dove.

For those traveling long distances, rather than pack an animal for the sacrifice, one would purchase one in the temple courtyard. That explains the animal vendors Jesus will drive out. My expectation is this was like waiting until you are at the airport to buy something to eat – you are going to pay a premium! The moneychangers are there because such purchases had to be made with the “pure” temple currency, not the coins of the realm upon which was stamped the image of the Emperor. Just to be clear, for our offering this morning, we gladly accept images of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, and particularly welcome the faces of Ulysses Grant and Benjamin Franklin.

Let us listen and hear God’s word to us in John 2:13-22:

<sup>13</sup>The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. <sup>15</sup>Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. <sup>16</sup>He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" <sup>17</sup>His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." <sup>18</sup>The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" <sup>19</sup>Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." <sup>20</sup>The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" <sup>21</sup>But he was speaking of the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup>After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

An angry Jesus, a violent Jesus. In the past, when Christian pacifists would appear before their draft boards, this passage was often cited with the question, "How can you say Jesus was a pacifist when he wielded a whip and overturned tables?" Responding the whip only appears in John's Gospel, while biblically correct, would not grant one conscientious objector status.

John provides no description of Jesus' emotion, and the word "anger" is not used in any of the Gospel accounts of the temple cleansing; still, we envision Jesus as angry. We can feel the fervor with which Jesus drives out animals and vendors. Painters of the biblical scene almost always place a whip in Jesus' hand. If it were not Jesus, we might label him as unstable, violent, having a fit of rage. But if we focus on perceived anger or violence, we may miss the heart of Jesus' message.

What we have in Jesus' cleansing of the temple, perhaps particularly with John's placement near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, is the prophetic part of what John Calvin outlines as Jesus' three offices of prophet, priest and king. Prophets can call a people to account for disobedience to the letter of the law of God, but as often the prophetic voice focuses on how the faithful have strayed from the spirit of the law. When Isaiah prophesied about Israel's fasting practices, he was not calling for an end to the fasting discipline. He was voicing God's concern that obedience to ritual was superseding care for the poor and hungry, the widow and orphan.

Similarly, a prophetic voice is wisely raised in our country, when discussions of the Ten Commandments are too often about whether they can be displayed in public, rather than how they are lived. Would that there would be more teaching of how the commandment against stealing includes not only breaking and entering, but also the legal thieveries of tax loopholes not available to the poor, or corporate greed and limitations on access to credit. Instead, there sometimes seems to be a self-righteous satisfaction in simply advocating for the commandments to be displayed in public places or posted on classroom walls.

As another Presidential campaign gears up, I expect we will again find candidates trying to out-virtue their opponents, by making statements to appeal to popular thought rather than faithful truth; some may even seek to “out-Christian” a rival. This is, in my opinion, an unhealthy and potentially dangerous trend, which could use an Isaiah to distinguish between ritually or politically correct words and faithfully just policies.

It is with such a prophetic spirit I see Jesus entering the temple. He is calling out those for whom a dedication to religious practice has superseded a devotion to faithful living. He is challenging the beliefs of those who equate obedience to ritual as righteousness before God. He is even overturning the security of those for whom feeding the temple treasury is more important than feeding the hungry child. As Gail O’Day writes in her biblical commentary, Jesus’ “challenges a religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God.” [O’Day, Gail, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, John, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 545]

“No longer open to a fresh revelation to God.” Certainly, Jesus’ comments about rebuilding the temple in three days go over the heads of Jewish leaders who have overseen forty-six years of reconstruction. John’s aside tells us what we already know, Jesus is talking about himself being the temple, and the three days marks the time between Jesus crucifixion on the cross to his resurrection.

I don’t know about you, but I have a sense of “gotcha” joy when I read of Jesus’ march through the temple. I can envision myself with him confronting the status quo of greedy vendors and moneychangers, and those who measure their righteousness in terms of fulfilled ritual. It is the way I feel when those with whom I disagree find themselves on the receiving end of prophetic wrath, or an attorney general’s indictment. I love it when the arrogant, particularly those I do not like, lose advertisers for their radio or television programs because their outlandish remarks were finally considered to cross the line. Maybe you don’t have such “gotcha” joy, but I do.

Of course, it is just at that point of our delight in the status quo of others being overturned, we are wise to move from watching Jesus enter the temple as an observer, or even marching in alongside him, to placing ourselves at one of those vendor or money-changing tables in the marketplace.

While we often say we are open to change, to reform, we may just as often only allow or consider reform that works for us, without upsetting our own status quos. As individuals and congregations, we set limits as to how far we are willing to be changed or stretched, and we define boundaries we are unwilling to cross.

The reason we invite Jesus to enter our own temple traditions is we know we are not immune from creating rituals of right belief. We too are susceptible to self-declaring our faith practices to be our righteousness, and justifying our excesses to be our earned right. Even in matters of values and social justice, we can fall victim to worshiping our rightness and believing God is well pleased. I would suggest that just as advocating the posting of the ten commandments does not mark faithfulness, neither does flying a rainbow flag, nor wearing a peace symbol, nor even hanging a cross around our necks. Each is an empty symbol unless accompanied by a faithful spirit.

The first section of a daily Lenten devotional we read is “Invitation,” and the various readings often focus on the burden of taking up Jesus’ cross. A part of the invitation for me is to accept the challenge of letting Jesus enter my own marketplace of ritual and habit. In one reading, Walter Wangerin writes of this in terms of looking into a mirror. Not a mirror over the bathroom sink, but one of those full length mirrors, that shows everything, and possible more than we want revealed. Yet, if we turn away from what is revealed, similar to turning away from the temple-entering Jesus, then we also turn away from our source of forgiveness, and possibility for healing. (Wangerin, Walter, in Bread and Wine, Orbis Books, 2005, p. 12)

The good news is the prophetic Christ who enters the temple market is not out to destroy, but to correct and rebuild. So, we trust Jesus to enter, and open ourselves to having revealed how we may have confused ritual practice with faithful living.

Sometimes it takes an out of character Jesus to shake up our lives, challenge our comforts, arouse our apathies, and scratch our self-righteousness. When the faithful of any theology or politics begin to worship the correctness they are vending in their marketplaces, it is time to invite in Jesus for a market correction.