



“No More Mr. Nice Guy”

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***Third Sunday in Lent
March 15, 2009
John 2:13-22 (TNTAP)***

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

Today’s reading is from the gospel of John, chapter 2, verses 13–22. The setting for this passage is the Temple portico in Jerusalem during the Passover Feast. In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke)¹, the story is set during the last week of Jesus’ earthly life. However, in John’s gospel, the Temple cleansing appears early in Jesus’ life, and is one of John’s signs that Jesus is the true Messiah.

Regardless of which gospel we read, the story in all four presents Jesus in rare form. Here, in this table-turning episode, Jesus expresses moral outrage at Temple leadership and practices. Specifically, Jesus was furious with the money changers who took over the only space where the Gentiles were permitted to enter and pray,² and who were price-gouging Passover pilgrims who needed to swap Roman coins for Temple gelt in order to pay their Temple tax and buy animal sacrifices for the Passover Feast.³

New Testament scholar, Jouette M. Bassler, explains in her commentary on John 2 that Temple pilgrims were at the mercy of the money changers when they arrived for feast days, because they could not (according to Jewish law) use Roman currency to buy sacrificial animals or make offerings, without violating the first commandment, and no one else other than the official money changers were authorized to exchange Roman currency for Temple gelt.⁴

As you may recall, the first commandment is “I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me.” Roman currency depicted Caesar’s image on the face of each coin. Caesar, by his own definition, was a pagan god. So to use Roman currency at the Temple was a violation of the first commandment.⁵

¹ Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the synoptic gospels by biblical scholars.

² W. Hulitt Gloser, “Homiletical Perspective on Jn. 2:13-22,” in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), p. 97.

³ Jouette M. Basler, “Exegetical Perspective on Jn 2:13-22,” in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), p. 97.

⁴ Jouette M. Basler, p. 97.

⁵ Jouette M. Basler, p. 97.

Mindful that we move through the season of Lent and that we also come to the scripture as pilgrims on a spiritual journey, let us prepare our hearts and minds for the reading of scripture by singing together the Musical Meditation.

MUSICAL MEDITATION “Guide Me, O My Great Redeemer”⁶ (v. 1) **No 18**

***Guide me, O my great Re-deem-er, pil-grim through this
bar-ren land; I am weak, but you are might-y;
hold me with your power-ful hand. Bread of heav-en, bread of heav-en,
Feed me till I want no more, feed me till I want no more.***

SCRIPTURE READING

Stephanie S. Spencer

John 2:13-22 (TNTAP)⁷ “Jesus Turns the Tables”

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, Jesus 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. Jesus told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making God's house a marketplace!" The disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The religious authorities then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body. After Jesus was raised from the dead, the disciples remembered that Jesus had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

SERMON

“No More Mr. Nice Guy”

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

Some may find it curious that I chose “Jesus’ Cleansing of the Temple” as the text for today’s sermon—particularly given that we are a mere six days away from our big deficit-destroying fundraiser, the Eden Church Dinner & Silent Auction.

In defense of the Stewardship Committee and myself, let me say that the National Council of Churches didn’t consult me when they established the *Revised Common Lectionary* and assigned the gospel lection for today.

Furthermore, even if I were the kind of preacher who strove to dodge a challenging text, the fact remains that the gospel renderings of the Temple Cleansing appears in every cycle of the *Revised Common Lectionary*, so there’s no getting around this story for denominations and preachers, like us, who follow the lectionary.

⁶ Text: John Huges. Public domain.

⁷ Gold, et. al. *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1995.

There is a hidden blessing in taking on this text today, however, and that blessing is that we are afforded an opportunity to clear up a common misinterpretation of the Temple Cleansing. One of the most common misinterpretations of this text is that Jesus was teaching believers to give up fundraising.

This assumption is not only biblically incorrect; it is also logically off the mark. Only in Fantasy Land can religious organizations flourish without the benefit of revenue or the practice of paying bills.

The main point that Jesus was trying to make in turning the tables was a theological one. He was expressing his outrage at the money changers and challenging the religious leaders of his day and the people who followed him to remember and reclaim their *raison d'être*—their reason for being as religious people.⁸

Jesus was upset with the money changers and the priests for replacing devotion to God with empty rituals,⁹ for supplanting acts of justice with animal sacrifices,¹⁰ and for gouging pilgrims with high exchange rates at the Temple gate.¹¹ In Jesus' view, the religious authorities of his day had lost their sense of purpose, and were making a mockery of the Temple as a result.¹²

III

In the view of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the righteous anger that Jesus displayed in turning the tables accounts for the drift of Jesus' followers and sets the stage for his passion and death. From this day onward, Jesus was seen as too great a threat to the Jewish and Roman authorities' to be ignored, and as a result he was ultimately arrested, tortured, and crucified in order to maintain the status quo.

The kind of negative publicity that Jesus drew from his table-turning episode prompted the kind of crowd reaction described by rock star Alice Cooper in his song, "No More Mr. Nice Guy." I'll spare you the vocals, but to hear the song in its entirety, click here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZnhuOEUFXA>

So for the authors of the first three gospels, Jesus' table-turning scene set the stage for his passion and death, and put his persecution and execution into context by forecasting that his martyrdom was an inevitable end for a man who messed with the principalities and powers of his day.

⁸ Gloer, p. 95.

⁹ Joseph D. Small, "Theological Perspective on Jun 2:13-22," in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), p. 92.

¹⁰ Bassler, p. 93.

¹¹ Bassler, p. 95.

¹² Gloer, p. 95.

John, by contrast with the synoptic authors, situates the table-turning account differently. Jesus was not, for John, a religious or political martyr, he was instead God incarnate. He was the divine who came to earth and who chose to die on a cross, once and for all, to atone for human sin. For John, Jesus took the place of the sacrificial animals and brought an end to the need for any more ritual sacrifices. Jesus was, in the words of orthodox and neo-orthodox theologians who would follow centuries later, “the expiation for our sins.”

Regardless of whether you see Jesus as a religious or political martyr, or as God incarnate and the expiation for human sin, the stir that Jesus created by turning the tables was a resounding call to clarify our reason for being, and to act in a manner that reflects our true identity and our true calling.

IV

This clarity is always needed, but not always found among Jesus’ followers or in other religious communities. Examples of individual believers and religious groups run amuck are easy to find in every age.

This past week, Loris Coburn provided a case in point from the March 2008 issue of the *Smithsonian* magazine titled, “10 Must-See Endangered Cultural Treasures.” This lengthy feature article includes ten vignettes about cultural treasures around the world that are rapidly deteriorating and at risk of complete destruction. One of those treasures is the Church of the Nativity, in Bethlehem, which is described in the vignette, *Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem: Holy War*.¹³

Most tourists who have visited the Holy Land have been to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. This site is said to mark the birthplace of Jesus.

In the vignette about the Church of the Nativity, author Abigail Tucker describes the difficulty of housing three Christian denominations (the Greek Orthodox, the Armenian Orthodox, and the Franciscan order of the Roman Catholic Church) under one roof, who are ostensibly trying to care for this treasure.

Tucker quotes several art historians who decry the postponed repairs to the Church of the Nativity, and who go on to explain that feuding monks from these denominations are a major deterrent to the preservation of the site. It seems, Tucker explains, that an ancient ruling during the Ottoman era grants ownership rights to whichever group cares for the church property. As a consequence, these three denominations have been fighting over who gets to clean and care for each room and its respective accoutrements, because whoever cleans and cares for the property owns the site *de facto*.

¹³ Abigail Tucker, “10 Must-See Endangered Cultural Treasures: Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem: Holy War,” in *Smithsonian*, March 2009, Vol. 39, No. 12, pp. 33-35.

Two Christmases ago, for example, a fight broke out over who got to dust the chandeliers at the Church of the Nativity. Several holy men pummeled each other with stones so severely that they landed in the hospital.

The greatest hope for reconciliation among the three denominations that lay claim to the Church of the Nativity and to the restoration of the building, according to Professor Raymond Cohen at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, now lies with the leadership of the Palestinian Authority,¹⁴ which controls Bethlehem. Last November, the Palestinian Authority helped organize a roof restoration effort for the Church of the Nativity and set up donations for that purpose.¹⁵

Professor Cohen opined that the Palestinian Authority's intervention is the most promising sign in years—not because of the funds it might raise, but because it represents outside leadership. Cohen goes on to explain, “Sometimes the behavior is so childish—you can't believe these are grown men. You've got to knock heads together and say, 'Guys, we're taking charge.'”¹⁶

This is essentially what Jesus does in the table-turning scene. He, like the Palestinian Authority, calls Temple worshippers to reclaim their reason for existence.

I suspect that our own Board of Trustees at Eden Church can barely imagine groups here warring over who *gets* to care for the church facilities and corresponding appointments.

Still, we modern Christians, like the people in Jesus' time and in every age, are vulnerable to struggles over “ownership” of the church. (When we get a little too inappropriately invested in a particular parish or issue, we may find ourselves using phrases like “my church,” when arguing our particular point of view, and forgetting that we are called together to be Christ's church.)

We modern Christians still struggle over decision-making authority, like Jesus' first followers. (Sometimes the issue is that we would prefer to dodge our personal agency and decision-making responsibility, while at others, one wonders just how long the Congregational Meeting could run.)

Like Jesus' contemporaries, we modern Christians continue to struggle over what constitutes a suitable offering, and how best to put the offerings received into the service of God. (The initial receipt and the ongoing dialogue we have had about how best to use the Oliver Gift come to mind.)

Like the Ancient Prophets, like Jesus Christ, and like the first apostles, we people of the Judeo-Christian faith also continue to grapple with how to define

¹⁴ Tucker, p. 34.

¹⁵ Tucker, p. 35.

¹⁶ Tucker, p. 35.

meaningful worship and faithful witness. (How should we say our prayers? What shape and form should our worship take? How faithful are our prayers expressed in our deeds?)

So like people of faith in every time and place, we continue to grapple with the issues that Jesus confronted in the Temple. We continue to struggle to discern and to faithfully express our reason for being.

This too is why Jesus reminded his followers—and us—that our calling is not our own; it comes from God. Our calling is not about our particular agenda; it is about God's agenda. And in his view, *how* and *why* we do things is as important as *where* we are going.

V

These challenging economic times in which we now live offer us further motivation to discern who we are, what we're about, and how we live our lives—as individuals, families, churches, schools, businesses, and governance at every level of society.

As we strive to minimize our budget deficits this year, as we draft our budgets for next year, and as we raise revenue to fund these budgets, we define our reason for existence.

As we refine job descriptions and hire new staff; as we find more effective ways to do ministry in our constantly changing organization; as we determine what groups we permit on our campus; and as we decide which organizations with whom we partner for social witness, we express our reason for being.

Jesus' hope for us is that we would discern our reason for being, and ground ourselves in a spiritual life that bears the fruits of love and justice.

Jesus didn't promise that it would be easy to get this clarity or to exhibit it, but he did promise to guide us and encourage us in claiming it and witnessing to it. So this, in the end, is what all the fuss is about in the Temple. It is about getting clear about our reason for being and living a life grounded in that clarity. My prayer for every one of us and for our church is that we will rely on God's help, and be faithful to our true calling. Amen.