

January 16, 2022

Second Sunday after Epiphany

John 2:13-25

“Prophetic Jesus”

1. “Christ is the reason for the season” I’m sure you’ve heard that phrase before.
 - a. It seems we hear it every year.
 - b. It’s either that or “keep Christ in Christmas” or some such slogan
 - c. I don’t subscribe to the notion that there is a war on Christmas, so that’s not why I bring up these slogans.
 - d. Rather, I think to say “Christ is the reason for the season” could be an appropriate critique of the commercialization or the secularization of the Christmas celebration
 - e. After all, the season’s visuals include aisles in stores with Christmas items around Halloween, or talk of whether enough Christmas stuff got sold Black Friday
 - f. Outside of church, there doesn’t seem to be enough conversation about how shocking it is for God to become human and come to show us what love is all about. THAT’S Christmas.
 - g. Inside of churches, even, there doesn’t seem to be enough conversation about how radical it is for God to be born to a young mother, Mary, who in the gospel of Luke then joyfully sings of overturning the corrupt power systems in favor of the downtrodden. THAT’S Christmas.
 - h. Clarifying the purpose of that celebration and rooting it where it belongs seems like a faithful thing believers should focus on.
2. Well in today’s passage, Jesus seems to be making the point that God is the reason for the Temple.
 - a. Jesus’ angry reaction at the temple wasn’t because he was anti-temple
 - i. After all, in the Gospel of John, Jesus was at the temple on a number of occasions, and often he went there to teach people
 - ii. Today’s passage is the first time John tells us of Jesus being there
 - iii. (Oh and you get extra points if you thought: wait, wasn’t the cleansing of the temple in Holy Week? – that is true for the other three gospels. Here, it’s at the beginning)
 - b. What we read in today’s passage is that Jesus was troubled by what he saw at the temple, because he felt they were drifting from the right focus
 - i. The temple in Jerusalem would have been a bustling, chaotic scene in the time of the Passover festival.
 - ii. Jesus himself had come to Jerusalem for the religious festival of the Passover, and he would have known that people were supposed to come and both offer the annual temple tax as well as participate in the Passover sacrifice (and/or other sacrifices offering according to their journey in the faith)
 - iii. The temple tax had to be given with a very specific coin,
 1. not a Roman coin, mind you, but a coin that could ONLY be available at the temple itself.

2. The point being, however, that in order to make that annual offering, people coming to Jerusalem had to exchange whatever money they had for the only acceptable coin.
 3. Thus the money changers, who you get the sense were making a profit off the exchange.
 4. And the people selling the cattle maybe were making a more than moral profit.
- iv. It was all of it put together, the animals, the commerce, the profiteering, and Jesus just blows his top, first making a whip of whatever he could get his hands on and getting the cattle and sheep out of the temple, and then overturning the tables of those money changers in disgust.
 - v. This was supposed to be the place where people came to seek God's presence
 - vi. This was supposed to be the place to feel connected to God!
 - vii. Jesus yells at them: You're making a mockery of this place! You're turning MY FATHER's house into a marketplace! You're losing sight of why this building is here, and why we pray and sacrifice, and even why we support its upkeep with the temple tax.
 - viii. The authorities recognize Jesus' actions for what they were, a prophetic speech, so they asked him: what sign do you have (to back up what you're saying), as other Biblical prophets would have then shared symbolic actions and a warning from God
 - ix. To which Jesus replies: destroy this temple, and I'll rebuild it in 3 days (which, in retrospect, his disciples figured that he spoke of his body being buried and then rising again)
 - x. If the temple was supposed to be the place of God's presence, Jesus was saying that in fact the presence of God rested on HIM
 - xi. And as I've shared with you before, the temple in Jerusalem was indeed destroyed by the Romans in 70AD, never to be rebuilt again.
 - xii. Jesus was overturning more than just a table with coins: he was overturning how they were to understand and follow God.
3. Jesus' prophetic overturning of tables represents not only addressing a particular situation (corrupt money changers, let's say) but in fact it represents overturning the system which makes a particular practice "normal" or "common place."
 - a. Something about the legacy of this congregation that we're very proud of is our focus on social justice
 - i. What we may not consider all the time, however, is that part of that prophetic work includes overturning tables when it is necessary to challenge the systems in the church or in society where unjust practices have simply become "normal" or "common place"
 - ii. Once upon a time, "White Only" drinking fountains existed in this country, for example. They were "normal"
 - iii. But what that means is that they were declared normal by those who held the reigns of power

- iv. Overturning tables while doing God's work indeed involves challenging structures like that which lull one into sleep, lull one into compliance.
 - v. Don't make a fuss. Don't rock the boat.
 - vi. And frankly that's an underlying argument: don't rock the boat includes a threat "or you might get thrown off the boat..."
- b. Jesus was courageous and faithful when overturning those tables, and Jesus gives us a model to follow to focus people on God instead of being distracted (by greed, by racism, by anything that keeps us from accepting that God's love is for all)
 - c. As a congregation, as we study more about racism (not instances but enduring structures of racism), it isn't just so that we then say "well, isn't that something!" or even "isn't that terrible" or even "but so much has changed"
 - i. We're looking at a table of structural racism that needs to be overturned, and the question is: are we up to it?
 - ii. Or more to the point: is God putting us up to it? Are we with God on this?
 - iii. Because, after all, God is the focus of our worship, and Jesus the reason for every season, and if something humans have created and fostered keeps us from seeing God fully in each person, then there is work to be done.
 - d. Questioning systems is dangerous because systems push back.
 - i. We might feel uncomfortable with the issues of power, or we might feel like it's not Christian to overturn tables, but we can't deny Mary sang about it, and Jesus did it.
 - ii. So we pray and we do our homework, and we hold on to one another, and we seek allies, and we learn, and we pray, and we question. And maybe small tables get overturned, as they have in the past by faithful people.
4. Jesus is the reason for the season. Couldn't agree more. And not just Christmas, by the way. If we take the message and example of Jesus seriously, at some point we will be called to join Jesus as he overturns another table. And so we pray and prepare...

Sources:

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