

Third Sunday in Lent
EXODUS 20:1-17
PSALM 19
I CORINTHIANS 1:18-25
JOHN 2:13-22
February 25, 2024

Going Postal! Going Rogue! Going Cross!

The anonymous letter writer of the epistle to the Ephesians declares, presumably without tongue in cheek, “Be angry but do not sin!” The writer then adds, “Do not let the sun go down on your anger! And do not make room for the devil!” Folks, never make room for the devil! After all, the satanic one has plenty of places to stay! But I digress; I often do! No doubt this epistolary composer was quoting from Psalm 4 which says, “When you are disturbed, do not sin! Ponder it on your beds and be silent!” These admonitions remind me of the numerous signs all around the Southern Seminary campus back in the day as the landscape staff tried in vain to protect the lawn, “Walk on the grass but don’t make paths!” How’d that work out for you? Not so much! Folks, there were paths everywhere, the Josephus Bowl, so named for the quadrangle, looking like a maze, or a perversely twisting and turning labyrinth! **As I read this story from John’s Gospel once again, I could not help but wonder if Jesus followed the Psalmist’s and the Ephesians writer’s sound advice. Was Jesus able to keep his anger to a minimum, to contain his level of vitriol, to keep his cool even under pressure, no doubt mad as a disturbed hornet, but calm as an assassin as he meticulously wove his rope, carefully crafting the loose and convenient cords into a stinging whip, chasing all the buyers and sellers of sacrifice out of the temple? Welcome to Jesus’ version of bussing tables! Table flipping! Flipping tables! Turning tables, to invoke a song by Adele No, frankly on that day I do not think Jesus was calm, cool, or collected! Nor was he out of control, on autopilot! He was in his right mind! He knew exactly what he was doing with every move he made! Righteous indignation? Indignant righteousness? Today we explore once more the event that for Jesus seemed to be a flash point, yes, an inflection point, becoming an instantaneous focal point of no return, the one singular and poignant act that sealed his fate, if indeed, the story the Gospel weavers wove was historically accurate. This story is**

recorded in all four Gospels, the event happening toward the beginning in John, early in Jesus' three-year ministry, and toward the end in the synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, late in Jesus' mission. It must have been important, significant from all angles! Matthew would also call everybody in the house a "den of robbers," i.e., with synonyms in the Greek including rebels, bandits, ironically revolutionaries, insurrectionist guerrillas, surely, reprobate prevaricators one and all.¹ "It has been suggested that the admission of merchants to the Court of the Gentiles was a recent development, approved by Caiaphas," a name we will come to know well in the upcoming passion drama.² From this bellwether moment forward there would be no turning back, no second chances or choices, no regrets, unless there were some, no cause to retrospectively ponder his actions, to reconsider any alternatives to his gut reactions that he might have had at the time, that he might have thought were options.

Following the unfolding drama of Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem, truly his destination of destiny, we certainly have cause to wonder about the rabbi's mental state, his level of anxiety, his palpable frustration, all the emotional and psychological factors that were swirling around in his head. Surely, he knew the end was near. Jesus had spoken clearly about his fate, no doubt pondering his mortality, the normal thoughts that any human being would contemplate when considering the prospects of being at death's doorstep. Perhaps his whole life, especially his mission and ministry that had emerged and evolved over these brief three years, would flash before him on occasion. Surely, Jesus must have wistfully reflected on successes and perhaps even some failures, all the twists and turns that had led to this pivotal moment on the last leg of his earthly journey. Well, it takes little if any imagination to understand what triggered this reactionary strike, this repulsive tableau that caused Jesus to go postal, to go rogue, and yes, to go cross! On this day, it is obvious that Jesus' was very cross and the implications in his actions continue to teach lessons and preach sermons in a variety of ways. Take your pick from the possibilities!

¹R. Alan Culpepper, "Matthew", in *The New Testament Library: A Commentary*, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2021), 399.

²*Ibid.*, 397.

Of all the potential problems associated with the horrific sights Jesus saw on that fateful day as he made his customary trip to the temple, a trip that was an expectation when coming to town, a requirement, for any faithful Jew who had come to Jerusalem for whatever business they might be conducting in the city of Zion. In this case it just so happened to be the Passover feast,³ yes, the biggie on the Jewish liturgical calendar, the major festival among major festivals. It is a safe guess that Jesus was witnessing what had suddenly, in his humble estimation, become a most egregious act in this traditional swap meet. Yes, there was something different this time around as Jesus observed the blatant bartering taking place within what had been rendered, devolving into, nothing more than an old-fashioned Near Eastern marketplace. Imagine going to church and an auction breaking out in the Narthex, the quick cadence of the auctioneer calling out bids as whatever goods and services were up for grabs, all the commotion happening at a dizzying pace, the rapid rate of the bidders reaching a crescendo as they tried ad nauseum to one up their stiff competition. “Do I hear fifty, fifty, how about sixty, sixty, do I hear seventy!” It reminds me of the hilarious, but deadly serious, bartering that took place between Abraham and God as the Holy One pondered the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah back in the day. The story tells of the over-the-top anthropomorphic deity debating the number of righteous citizens it would take to repent of the divinely hatched plan to wreak havoc and destruction upon the local citizenry. It is pathetically comical to read about the Father of the Faithful trying in vain to save the unsuspecting inhabitants from the wrath of God, the angry One unleashing the fury of divine retribution against the hapless citizens of these two wickedly perverse and evil enclaves. In Jesus’ intuitive eyes, what a disgusting display this marketing ploy must have been.

What a sight this part of the temple courtyard must have looked like, all the noisy, smelly, animals, the sounds of anxious hoofbeats, tied on the shortest of ropes, the doves confined in their cages, all the barnyard animals contained in the smallest of space, the scene, found in closest proximity to the court of the Gentiles, the outer perimeter, perhaps looking all the while like a contemporary Chinese wet market! Interestingly, only John mentions livestock of the hooved variety, cattle and sheep, the synoptics offering a kinder and gentler version,

³Gail R. O’Day, “John”, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. IX, ed. Leander E. Keck, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 542.

mentioning only doves, the prescribed offering for the purification of women (Leviticus 12:6-8), lepers (Leviticus 14:2, 21-22), uncleanness (Leviticus 15:3, 14), and for the poor (Luke 2:24).⁴ No doubt the birds sat still, quietly cooing, oblivious to their bloody and violent end. Commenting on the sacrificial animals, R. Alan Culpepper observes “By the first century, the temple cult in Jerusalem had become one of the largest in the world. The quantity of animals and goods consumed during a festival was staggering. Although numbers in ancient sources are often exaggerated, Josephus’s claim that during Passover of 66 CE, worshippers required an estimated 255,600 lambs (*J.W.* 6.9.3) suggests the enormity of the operation. A more realistic, but still impressive calculation is that the continuous daily sacrifices alone would have required ‘nearly 1,200 animals (bulls, oxen, rams, and lambs).’ Blood flowed from the altar in such quantity that it was carried by a channel to two holes, like two narrow nostrils, in the southwestern corner of the temple wall, and thence into the Kidron Valley, where it was collected and sold to gardeners and farmers as fertilizer (m. Yoma 5:6; m. Mid. 3:2; m. Me‘il. 3.3). The animals had to be without blemish or broken bones, and if they were quadrupeds, they had to be male. Since thousands of pilgrims came to Jerusalem each year to participate in the three great pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles), there was a great demand for animals fit for use as offerings.”⁵ **Those in charge of currency exchange, simply going about, yes, minding their business, exacting all the proceeds, the transactions of the money changers changing hands so rapidly that it was easy to forget that the purpose of the whole enterprise was supposedly, by design, meant to foster religious ritual, increase piety and purity, enable devotional awareness in what was a carefully, highly orchestrated, perfectly choreographed, scripted to the last detail, spiritual discipline. Yes, what a wild and crazy scene. And Jesus would only add to the excitement, creating a whole lot of confusion, mass hysteria amidst the perplexed crowd, as he dared to disturb a tradition that was considered basic, mundane, a routine, most ordinary, practice. Oh, the audacity of interrupting a recurring part of temple life, these transactions common, and very necessary, a seemingly innocuous, occurrence that was an everyday part of Jewish sacrificial life at the time. What would cause Jesus to go against protocol, and place himself in harm’s way as he confronted establishment Judaism, going**

⁴Culpepper., 397.

⁵Culpepper, 396.

against the grain of a deepening conflict now a permanent rift, a breach in a complicated relationship now irretrievably broken? On a when Jesus would literally shake the foundations of the power structure of the Temple⁶ day the rabbi would bring to a grinding halt the wheels of what Jesus surely must have perceived to be the height of hypocrisy and injustice, immediately forcing a cease-and-desist moment to this extortionary price-gouging, inflationary exercise, no giving of offerings, no worship transpiring! Nope! Not today! Not on this day! Circle this one! “Sacramentum interruptus!” Wow!

But aside from how off-putting this supposedly fiduciary exercise might have appeared, the question of “why” is always at the forefront in our reading. To dig deeper we must take a step back and consider the scenario in which Jesus literally whips and twirls, creating a scandalous, riotous, scene of the worst kind, Jesus doing his best Linda Blair in the Exorcist impersonation. Money changing in the temple can easily be described as a necessary evil, the temple treasury refusing to accept coinage with Greek or Roman images and thus this profane and idolatrous currency was required to be changed into the legal Tyrian currency in Jerusalem. This extended to the temple tax. This pedestrian function was a part of daily temple life, nothing new here, nothing new to see, nothing new under the sun. And yet, on this day, an average, ordinary, day leading up to Passover, Jesus saw something that set him off in the worst way. Yes, Jesus could smell the corruption taking place in the place where God supposedly dwells! Yes, on this day he would go postal, go rogue, go cross! **On this day I think, perhaps for the first time, Jesus saw right through the ruse, his transparency revealing a lack of transparency. He saw a fleecing of the flock that lacked integrity, falling way short of a minimum, even a modicum of authentic sacramental substance, a failure of religious leadership, those entrusted with authority, carry out this enterprise with dignity and the sensitivity of genuine care, compassion, and concern. The incensed rabbi saw before him a charade of charlatans, no better than the worst of the lifestyles of the rich and evangelical, the winking and smiling faces of not-at-all trustworthy TV preachers hawking their wares with empty promises as they line their pockets with the proceeds of their snake oil sales. But I think there was an even deeper problem. I believe that Jesus was somehow made aware in a way he had never realized before the danger of the institutionalization of institutions,**

⁶O’Day, 545.

even though, despite the fact, that all institutions, including churches and denominations, institutionalize. Institutionalism is a constant threat, a constant fear, a constant occurrence found in any organization, organizational structure a veritable petri dish, a greenhouse for such. As one commentator expounds on this idea, “Jesus’ dramatic actions in (John) 2:13-16, through which he issued a radical challenge to the authority of the religious institutions of his day, issue a similar challenge to the institutionalism of the contemporary church. Christian faith communities must be willing to ask where and when the status quo of religious practices and institutions has been absolutized and, therefore, closed to the possibility of reformation, change, and renewal. The great danger is that the contemporary church, like the leaders of the religious establishment in the Gospel of John, will fall into the trap of equating the authority of its own institutions with the presence of God. All religious institutional embeddedness—whether in the form of temple worship, unjust social systems, or repressive religious practices—is challenged by the revelation of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.”⁷ Yes, we can all fall victim to any alluring temptation, drink our own congregational Kool Aid, when doing any self-examination as a local church. I think that Jesus was not upset about this individual act, the occasion for his anger, but was incensed by the system that had been corrupted, hijacked and taken hostage by the perpetrators of trade, yes, this being the driving issue fueling his rage that day.

It is easy to read this story and throw rocks in glass houses, to arrogantly make accusatory, as well as inflammatory, comments about other institutions that have concretized their status in such a way, to the degree, as to be Teflon, without question beyond repute and critique. Some have misused this text to take another antisemitic jab at ancient Judaism to further the cause and defend the triumphant superiority of Christianity, doing so as if Jesus ever abandoned the faith of his forebears. No, once again, Jesus sought to reform Judaism, his criticism always leveled as a permanent insider, his goal the radical reformational transformation of the faith he loved dearly to his dying breath. This story, plausible in every respect as historically reliable, is a reminder of the dangers that lurk with every institution, religious or not, with every local church that seeks to be missional as beloved faith community. Every day we must be about the sometimes, perhaps oft

⁷O’Day, 545.

times, painful, the painstaking, task of self-examination, of self-reflection, as we contemplate our next moves, the introspection demanded of any of us who dare to speak a word even remotely for God, who have the audacity to do anything in the name of the Holy One or even in the precious name of Jesus. Motive is always at the center of our self-assessment, our self-questioning, every inquiry about our being and doing, yes, as it surely was raised on a fateful day back in the day in the intuitive, yes, critically thinking, mind of one Jesus of Nazareth once upon a time when he got angry and demanded accountability on the spot.

Our main lection for today from the Gospel of John offers us two sobering considerations. The first is the reminder that Jesus was human and allows and expects humanity to emanate from all of us human beings, anger included, yes, every emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual dynamic associated with being human. What else could we be or do? Yes, there is much to get angry about in our world, more than could be said in one sermon but you do not need that reminder this morning for you all know them well. Second, this text is a warning, a reminder that we are to be, or should be, our biggest, yes, our worst critiques, yes, prone to over analysis, continually second guessing everything we proclaim and everything we do. Therein is our safety net, literally our life preserver, our life raft! Every day we seek to keep it real, to find assurance as best as we know how, not to give us comfort or a false sense of security, but to help us make sure we are coloring within the lines we have established in response to the Spirit as we sense the leading and guidance of holy presence, staying in the boxes we have carefully vetted according to the lovingly gracious, the peaceful and merciful, way of Jesus, moving within and without our presumed comfort zones as we proclaim the message we believe we have been given, this witness, our testimony, we proudly proclaim in our preaching and teaching. This is our mantra and our goal as we strive with our best efforts to fulfill the great commission in the ministries and mission to which we believe with all our being, that we fully perceive to be our destiny and our high calling until death us do part. And we do so as a sacred trust with every beloved person, including every coin and every dollar that comes through our doors!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and calls us to constantly be about the business of cleansing our temple, our bodies, including,

of course, our church body, with every ounce of breath we take, with each day we live! Amen and amen!