

## Raise Up

John 2:13-25

March 3, 2024 Third Sunday of Lent Series: *What are you UP to?*

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*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, 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. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 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.*

*When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.*

This story has some interesting layers of interpretation.

This is a contentious story. Jesus turns over the tables of those selling the sacrificial animals for the rituals in the Jerusalem temple. He threw their coins to the ground. Forming a leather whip, he began cracking it at the money changers. "Get this stuff out of here," he yells. "This is not a marketplace."

Or maybe it is a story about how church should or should not raise funds. Should we start charging for coffee and cookies after worship?

According to the Gospels, this is an inflammatory story. When Jesus turns over the tables in the Gospel of Mark, it is the last straw (11:15-19). The same in Matthew and Luke. The Organizers of his Organized Religion say, "That's it! We must get rid of him." So it sets the wheels in motion for Jesus' final week. The very religious people, the rule keepers and power holders, will silence him, squelch him, and push him out of their world. The inference is the temple is just the way they want it.

What's interesting is that, by the time this story is told again in the Gospel of John as we have it today, there are some significant changes. John is writing about 90 AD. The Jerusalem temple

had been destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. So it had been gone for over twenty years. The Roman army tore it down, stone from stone. John remembers Jesus making a mysterious declaration, "Destroy this temple, and I will build it up, raise it up, in three days."

Another significant change and unique aspect of John's telling is he moves this episode from the end of Jesus' life to the very beginning of his ministry. For John and his community, the temple's cleansing is something far more than an historical event that prompted the crucifixion. No, this is a story of how the early followers of Jesus were to relate to God. Because for John, in his day, faith could not be centered on a building. The building no longer existed.

But why did that matter? What changed? **Let's look more closely at the temple.**

The place where God acted was The Temple. It was first established as a house of prayer. It was the one place on earth where people were re-connected to Holy One after some life changing event, like the birth of children, or the death of a family member, or after something that they have done. The Temple is the place of restoration. That's the heart of all those old Jewish rules and rituals about purity and holiness. When something happens, God provides the means to bring you back into relationship. God does this to welcome us completely.

At some point this theology, these practices, became rigid. And the temple system and the lines of who is clean and unclean and the need for sacrifices to make a person right with God.

But John gives us a clue that Jesus was changing this. Our passage comes right after the wedding at Cana when Jesus turned water into wine. John gives us an important detail: the water was in stone jars, which meant it was used for the rites of purification. By the time of Jesus, there was an elaborate system of purification. Some things were considered pure or clean, and others impure or unclean....The system created a world with sharp social boundaries between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile. Changing this water into wine was symbolic of breaking down these barriers.

The Temple was the heart of the purity system. The animals being sold there were required for sacrifice. Moneychangers were an essential part of the system because it was idolatrous to use Roman coins stamped with the emperor's image to buy your sacrifice. The moneychangers were giving pure tokens in exchange for impure money. It was big business, especially during Passover. It also meant the poorer you were, and the less able you were, the less access you had to a good relationship with God. (Rev. Joanne Whit blog post)

Jesus raised up his righteous anger about a system that penalizes the poor and prevents people from being seen as beloved, whole, invited into a sacred space. He disrupts a system that was not life-giving.

What tables need to be turned over in our lives to make room for a different way of living? Are we stuck with trying to earn our way into being loved? Or are we indifferent and see no reason for righteous anger at injustice? How does this story invite us to turn over tables and be willing to be disrupted? Is there some anger that needs to be expressed?

### **Jesus' Body is now the Temple**

But there is more. Jesus disrupts more of the conventional and accepted views.

And then Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up again on the third day." On the third day . . . With that little phrase, John winks at his congregation, prompting them to affirm that **Jesus is the Temple**. If the Temple is the meeting place between God and the people, then Jesus is that meeting place. Sixty years after the Resurrection, twenty years after Jerusalem was destroyed, John's church knew - God meets us in Jesus the Christ, the Cosmic Christ.

It is hard to grasp what a radical declaration this was. The scene takes place in the center of the Temple—in the Holy of Holies—the Ark of the Covenant was set. And there, in the heart of the Temple complex, in the heart of the city which served as the spiritual and political heart of Israel – the place where God dwelt among God's people. The Holy One, Divine Mystery was there in the temple. A building.

Then Jesus disrupts this theology. Jesus identifies himself as The Temple. The Holy is not in a building but a body. Shocking.

Jesus dares his listeners to "destroy this temple." They misunderstand, of course, and assume that Jesus is referring to the temple they're standing in. But no, John insists in his Gospel. Jesus isn't referring to edifices built of stone or brick or wood. The home of the transcendent is not a courtyard, or an altar. Rather, God resides in a different kind of temple altogether — the temple of Jesus's own body.

### **Christ – Incarnate Love, Body of Christ and Bodies**

During this Lenten season, I'm thinking and praying a lot about what it means to honor human bodies — mine, yours, everyone's — as holy places. As homes for God.

We are people of the Incarnation in the truest sense, called to look, to see, to break bread, share wine, and wash feet. How can we learn to see our embodied lives, our sensory lives, our physical lives, as fully implicated in our lives with God?

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes that it is not possible to lean into God's love for my body, without simultaneously recognizing that God loves "all bodies everywhere." The "bodies of the hungry children and women in war-torn places along with the bodies of sleek athletes and cigar-smoking tycoons." "One of the truer things about bodies," Taylor concludes, "is that it is just about impossible to increase the reverence I show

mine without also increasing the reverence I show yours.” In other words, once I value my own body as God’s temple, as a site of God’s pleasure, delight, and grace, how can I stand by while other bodies suffer exploitation, poverty, discrimination, or abuse?

What if this text is calling us to see that..

Righteous anger is considered to be good, conscientious, moral, and there’s always a time and place for such emotion. To disrupt evil.

And

When Jesus says he is the temple, it means we experience Holy presence in a body. And that those people with bodies outside the temple, waiting to buy a sacrifice so they can go into the temple building and be made clean and right with God - that is no longer to be practiced. Because those people are beloved, clean, invited, welcome. Samaritans, lepers, the poor...

I feel sad and angry when I see or think about the suffering of so many people – in Ukraine. And I feel sad and angry when I see the horrific suffering in the midst of more attacks on people in Gaza who are starving. People in Israel and Palestine want the war, the killing, to stop and to stop Netanyahu and the army from killing so many innocent people. And people in Ukraine and in Russia want Putin to stop killing innocent people in his own country and in Ukraine. The funeral of Alexei Navalny was an incredible testament to his work & sacrifice.

Wendy Farley shared this week that she has many people in her life who are passionate about justice and feel so much hatred, contempt and anger toward those who are perpetuating lies, violence and evil. She said - We are living in spiritually dangerous times. The challenge is not to become numb. We need to be deeply grounded in community and spiritual practices. And to find small ways to care and be people of compassion who do take small actions toward justice and shalom. And to keep our hearts open to beauty in all its forms.

That’s why we are here. The church is that group of people - not the building, but the group of people - who point to Christ and his mission. We are the people who tell the truth about Cosmic Christ. The scriptures are Spirit’s gift to instruct us, but we don’t worship the scriptures. We look through them like a window and we worship God, Holy Presence, Source of Love & Shalom. We come to know this love that is embodied, love incarnate with a mission to come into the world that the Creator loves, to offer grace and truth, bread of life.

Whatever happens in the Temple or Church is not the main thing. It can only point to the Main Thing, and that is life-giving relationship with God. The Main Thing is the deep trust that you belong to Divine. Whatever we do in the Temple/Church must point to the living truth. The truth is you are beloved and held in that love now and forever. That’s why we are here. Amen.

#### Sources

Rev. William Carter, “Cleaning House,” March 9, 2014 <https://billcartersermons.blogspot.com/>

Rev. Joanne Whitt, “The Disruptive Jesus,” Feb. 28, 2024 <https://solve-by-walking.com/>