

John 2:13-22

word count: 1,827

About ten years ago I found an old phonograph record of a famous Los Angeles minister who had made such a lengthy and colorful mark on this community and the church I once served as a staff member. He was also one of the most influential figures in determining that the State of California would not put fluoride in its water, having preached thunderously in the 1950's that fluoride was a Soviet plot to turn our brains soft so that we would submit to Communism.¹

I took this vinyl record to my cabin where I still have a record player, and listened to his Christmas Eve sermon from 1966. I couldn't believe it when I heard it, and ended up playing this one part of it over and over again until I learned it. This minister preached a very different Jesus than the one we are used to hearing about. It goes something like this:

"Friends, I turned on my radio because I wanted to hear some *Christmas* music. It was *Christmas*, so I expected to hear *Christmas* music. But when I 'turned on' my radio.....all I heard was.....BOOOOOOGIE--WOOOOOGIE!

Jesus(*huh*) would be *angry*. He wouldn't go for that namby-pamby stuff. Jesus(*huh*) was a two-fisted, hard-living, *man's* kind of man. He wasn't soft. He could spot trouble a mile away, and he knew how to fix it."

Well, I had to stop and think. Jesus as some kind of John Wayne archetype does not fit the image I understand about Jesus at all, nor does it help me feel any kind of personal relationship to the Christ I had envisioned.

But I kept thinking about this old recorded sermon because of today's text. Of course, a John Wayne Jesus is hard to fathom, but when you think of it, many of the depictions of Jesus lead us to believe he had a meek demeanor, when in fact the opposite may have been true. We ask for and expect an all-loving, all-compassionate, gentle Jesus, just as we want our world and our lives to be safe from suffering, sorrow, tragedy, and rage.

We project our own desire for perfection upon the image of Jesus; if we are not loving enough, we look to him as the model. If we fail one another, we hold him up as the model for fogiveness; steadfast and compassionate. We may completely blow it, lose our cool, our tempers, our composure, but he never does. Or does he?

The visual images of Jesus are of a man surrounded by fluffy lambs, a man who smiles in the center of the children who flock to him. He is silently meek yet noble in the face of persecution, and the depictions of his suffering are legion.

About a year ago there was a story in the paper about why there were fewer men in church than women. The story quoted leaders of new "masculinized churches," who say that too often Jesus is depicted as a quiet, passive sort, and that many guys do not resonate with a man like that. As a result, there are now churches for men, where guys can come together to revel in a holy-hormonal Jesus of the testosteroneal testament. The article talked about one men's church in particular that is painted forest green inside with plaid furnishings and racks of horns on the walls.

But then here it is. They might be on to something after all. The story is about passion, integrity, and caring enough to act boldly. This Gospel story, recorded in all four Gospels, is about an irritated, angry Jesus with a short fuse. He is no meek and mild person, but a man of action and even rage. This man throws over the tables in the temple and drives out the moneychangers. He is hardly one who maintains perfect composure through meditation; he is instead capable of losing his temper and just letting it rip!

We know that Jesus exhibits anger in the gospels, but nowhere is it like this. And where does he choose to do it? This isn't about a neighbor, a city, a government, or any social situation. This happens in the most holy place, the center of Jewish life.

A little background. Animal sacrifices were still being made at the temple. People from far away might be able to bring one of their own livestock, but people in the city would be less likely to have animals at their disposal.

Money needed to change hands, but Roman money could not be used in the temple, and so it needed to be changed for temple currency instead.

What was at the root of all of this was the need to observe the purity codes. New Testament scholar Marcus Borg in his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, makes a compelling case for Jesus' ministry as a confrontation with this vast purity system. He points to the profound implications of this system:

“The effect of the purity system was to create 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.”²

The temple was the center of the purity system. You went to the temple to buy an animal in order to make your sacrifice, and what you could afford to pay determined which kind of animal you would buy. Cattle and sheep were the desirable animals, while doves went for a low price. So, financial implications surfaced in the search for purity. The poor, who might not manage to give their tithe—10% of their crop, found they were then unable to sell their grain because it was judged to be impure. When it came to temple services, the poor were unable to buy the best animals. Who was poor? Almost everyone. Money-changers became an important part of this system. They were giving “pure” tokens in exchange for impure” money, sometimes, for an extra fee.

Preacher and professor Barbara Lundblad said of this, “Jesus challenged the purity system constantly. It is no accident that there are so many stories about Jesus getting his life dirty by engaging in impurity! He touched lepers, was touched by a hemorrhaging woman, went into a graveyard, which was unclean, to cast out demons and send them into a herd of pigs, which were also unclean. He ate with outcasts, that is to say, those at the bottom of the list of those deemed impure.

Marcus Borg elaborates:

“Jesus brought his challenge to the center of the purity system, the temple, with his action of driving out the money-changers and the sellers of sacrificial animals. His charge that the temple authorities had turned the temple into a ‘den of robbers’ may very well refer to the economic interest that the temple elite had in the purity system.”

What economic or political interests are commingled with religious institutions today? I wonder if there are some things that have to be driven out of our lives and out of the lives of our churches and our communities, because instead of bringing us closer to a sense of the Divine, they drive wedges in our human communities creating false purity codes designed to make sharp social distinctions. These separations keep us from meeting the divine by repelling us from the commandment to love God and one another as ourselves.

On a level close to many of us, if you watched Jon Stewart call Jim Cramer (and CNBC by association) to account for the role he played in running up the market to unsustainable levels (which in turn cleaned out his viewers), and saw Stewart confront him in video clips that chronicled Cramer in an unethical exchange, then today's scripture describing Jesus' righteous anger against the moneychangers in the temple might have visceral and satisfying edge.

The temple merchants are easy to see; they misrepresent—they steer people down the road away from the radical inclusivity of Jesus.

Barbara Lundblad, puts it this way, “Jesus came to the temple to overturn every barrier that separates us from the Divine. Jesus knelt down to wash his followers’ feet and overturned categories of master and servant, pure and impure forever. Jesus pitched his tent in our midst, a living temple.” ...Where in the all-inclusive love that we must share, there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free. There is neither male nor female, neither gay nor straight, neither black nor white; where there is no one who can in love be excluded by anything that goes by the name of a modern purity system, be it a religious, social, political or economic system.

Look at the dishonesty in how we interpret what is sacred through the influence of religious leaders and religious organizations just in this last divisive election in California. And their purity system, their “setting apart” of people, is something Jesus broke at every turn. We can see that Jesus was right, and that his anger was not unjustified. Keep on tipping over those tables.

Perhaps as Christians we’ve become afraid of conflict because it’s so difficult to handle. We are awfully polite people. But the prophets are rarely smooth or comfortable. Like Jesus, they are often angry in their confrontation of injustice.

St. Augustine wrote that Hope has two beautiful daughters: Anger, so that what must not be cannot be; and Courage, so that what can be, will be.

For me, this is difficult. I try to be one of those polite people. Maybe you share with me the desire to be kind, even if it means putting yourself at risk. And, this text helps me a great deal. Today I want to own that anger, not be ashamed of it.

On this upcoming sixth anniversary of the war, I read that over a million people have died, from a war that was built on false information, and that has contributed to the shambles of our present economy. When there is injustice that only gets worse, anger, like Jesus’ own anger, is there so that what must not be cannot be; and courage must follow it, so that what can be will be. Tip over the tables.

If a system enriches the few, impoverishes the many, if it sets up social boundaries that alienate, or if it even endangers the planet, it must be changed; tip over the tables.

I am not saying we should walk around angry in our daily lives. Righteous anger is not about our personal relationships, or how we conduct ourselves in public life. As with Jesus, it is about demanding that the systems that we believe are sacred operate with integrity to serve all; within and without all boundaries of faith, society, politics, and country.

If those systems have become corrupt, bring out your inner-John Wayne, it’s in there somewhere—you don’t need to find a church with plaid and antlers...and tip over some tables, *pilgrim*. AMEN.

Sermon Resources:

- 1) James Fifield: in “The American Right Wing: *A Report to the Fund for the Republic, Inc.* by Ralph E. Ellsworth and Sarah M. Harris, University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science, 1960 pp. 12-13
<https://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/3928/gslisoccasionalpv00000i00059.pdf?sequence=1>
- 2) Marcus J. Borg, “Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time,” HarperSanFrancisco, 1994 p. 52 Referenced: Barbara Lundblad—the mentions I make come from her sermon called, “It’s Not About Bingo,” (March 2, 1997) where she preaches on the same text.