

“Upset the Apple Cart”

In our scripture passage today from John 2:13-22, the evangelist John creates a large and dramatic depiction of Jesus’ actions in the Temple complex. Jesus herds animals and people out of the Temple court, pouring out money and overturning money-changing tables as he goes. John alone of the gospels mentions sheep and cattle and the detail of Jesus’ whip. Jesus’ actions in the Temple create a mood of urgency and haste. Jesus’ actions are intense.

We must understand John’s purpose in how he presents this event. John contrasts Jesus’ authority with the authority of the Temple cult. John contrasts Jesus’ teachings with the authority of the Pharisees. Jesus is in direct contact with the Jewish establishment and during his ministry Jesus will develop a deepening conflict with that establishment. John highlights the challenge and threat the abundant life offered by Jesus poses to the existing order.

We need to put this event into its proper religious and historical context. It is set during Passover. Because Passover was a pilgrimage feast, many of those coming to worship in the Temple would have journeyed a great distance and would have not brought animals with them. The cattle, sheep and doves were required for burnt offerings in the Temple. The people needed to buy them to participate in Temple worship.

The people also had to pay a Temple tax. Everyone Jew over nineteen had to pay this tax. The temple tax and the money for the animals could not be paid in Greek or Roman coinage because of the human image (the Emperor's head) on these coins. This would be the money most people brought with them to Jerusalem. The changing of money was necessary. According to the research of William Barclay, the annual profit of the money-changers was 9000 pounds (in late 1950s money).

Christians who see this story as principally as an illustration of extortionist practices of the Jewish Temple authorities disregard the realities of the Temple worship in Jesus' day. There were inevitable abuses of the Temple system, but by and large what the money-changers and sellers of animals were doing was perfectly legal. What enraged Jesus was that the pilgrims, who could ill afford it, had to pay these fees to participate in worship. To him, it was a rampant and shameless social injustice. What made it worse was that it was being made in the name of religion.

The point we need to take from this story is that Jesus confronts the system itself, not simply its abuses. The institutional system of the Temple complex allowed these fees to be paid as a condition of worship. This is apparent when Jesus confronts the dove sellers by saying, "Stop making my Father's house a

marketplace.” Jesus issues a powerful challenge to the very authority of the Temple and its worship.

The Jews then ask for a sign from Jesus. They question his authority to do what he did in the Temple. The Jews here represent those who do not know Jesus. Jesus tells them to destroy the Temple and in three days he will raise it up. The Jews respond with disdain. How dare you talk about destroying our temple which has been under construction for forty-six years. They respond with a very pragmatic protest that reveals that they only understood the surface meaning of Jesus’ words.

They did not understand that Jesus was talking in symbols. He never said he would destroy the physical material temple and that he would rebuild it. Jesus in fact looked for the end of the Temple. Jesus expected that the Temple would pass away; that he had in fact come to render its worship unnecessary and obsolete; and He would never suggest that He would rebuild the Temple at all. Jesus shattered the Jews by telling them that the Temple with all its magnificence and all the money and skill that had been lavished on it were completely irrelevant; that He had come to show men a way to come to God without any Temple at all.

John 2:21 suggests that Jesus’ body is now the focus of God. John 1:51 recalls where the Son of Man replaces Jacob’s ladder as the focus of God’s

interaction with the world. The Jews were confused when they thought Jesus claimed he would raise the Temple in three days. The verb Jesus used to speak of the raising of the Temple is the same verb used to speak of resurrection. As explained by John, Jesus was actually speaking of the raising of the Temple of his body.

Jesus has the authority to challenge the Temple system because He is now the focus of God's presence on earth. Jesus does not say he is going to destroy the Temple; he actually says to them, "Destroy this Temple." He is issuing a challenge to them that they need to get rid of the institution that is no longer serving the people's access to God. God, as known in Jesus, not the Temple, shall from now on be the focal point of worship activity.

We need to be clear that Jesus is not against Judaism per se. He honors their festivals and traditions. He challenges a religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God. He upsets the apple cart.

The Christian faith has to ask today, "Have our religious practices and institutions become so absolute and fixed that they are closed to the possibility of reformation, change and renewal? The danger is that the church, if it has not already done so, will fall into the trap of equating the authority of its own

institutions with the presence of God. All religious institutional embeddedness, whether Temple worship, or unjust social systems or repressive religious practices, is challenged by the revelation of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The church, specifically in our case the United Methodist Church, faces questions today as to whether it will change or do away with the institution of the church which exists today. Will we make changes to the policies of our church which will open it up more to who can be leaders and ministers in our churches? Or, will we keep things the same?

Questions will need to be asked and answered. If we keep the church the same, are we just maintaining the institution as an institution, or does our church in its current formation exist to fully promote the abundant life of Jesus Christ for all? Does the current structure of our church promote oppression which is not compatible with the message of Jesus Christ? Is the current structure just? Is the current structure in accord with the Ten Commandments? Is our current structure in accord the Sermon on the Mount? Does the current institution of the United Methodist Church encourage us to go and make disciples of all nations as Jesus commissioned in Matthew 28:19?

As we read v. 22 of our passage today, after the resurrection, the disciples remembered what Jesus had said about being raised up in three days. In John 14:26, Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit “will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” As we reflect on and ponder the critical questions which face our church, remembrance is active reflection on the past in light of the resurrection with the aid of the Holy Spirit. The combination of scripture and Jesus’ word in v. 22 shows that the early church began to grant Jesus’ word with the same authority it had already granted scripture. Verse 22 points to the interpretive activity of believers as they remember and claim the stories and sayings of Jesus as their own. As we determine how much we need to upset the apple cart, let us always be guided by the Holy Spirit and the life of Jesus to make sure all persons experience the abundant life brought by the incarnate and resurrected Jesus.