

Jesus and the Temple – March 8, 2015

John 2:13-22

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About a decade ago a famous Presbyterian minister passed away. But Mr. Fred Rogers was not known as a pastor – he was the host of a children’s program – a TV show about his neighborhood. I can recall watching his show as child. I can remember his quiet manner and calm presence. In the tributes following his death, his friends and family affirmed that the persona he exhibited on PBS television was identical to his life off camera.

One written tribute was made by a man who had once interviewed Mr. Rogers on TV. Following the interview, Mr. Rogers offered to drive the man back to his hotel. As they pulled up to the gate of the studio parking during rush hour traffic, Mr. Rogers patiently sat at the wheel, calmly waiting for a break in traffic so he could make his left turn. He quietly commented that such traffic was typical for the hour. The interviewer inquired, “Don’t you ever get frustrated with anything?” After thinking for a moment, Mr. Rogers replied, “Sure. Yes. Sometimes. Sometimes I get frustrated. Don’t you?” A response completely in character with the man that he was.

Although Fred Rogers was well known for his laid-back manner, he never made headlines for living up to that expectation. During his life Mr. Rogers was invited to give speeches and make commencement addresses. They were always given in a manner consistent with who he was. No surprises. But imagine for a moment, the reaction he would have stirred had he, just once, arrived somewhere and instead of a calm address delivered an angry diatribe. Consider the uproar he would have created if just once Mr. Rogers was caught on tape cursing after a speech or complaining about his audience. Such a spectacle would have jarred and confused us. (Illustration idea from the Calvin Seminary website)

Maybe that’s why the scene of Jesus at the Temple is one of the most famous stories in the gospels. It is one of the few stories recorded in all four gospels. This story bothers and confounds us because it appears to us that, Jesus, calm, mild-mannered, turn-the-other-cheek Jesus, has gone off half-cocked. Brandishing a whip and causing a general commotion, in the Temple no less, Jesus seems to have lost all control. And we shake our heads in amazement.

We can possibly imagine someone like Fred Rogers having a bad day. We might have been able to imagine him going off in a public place about something that really irked him. Momentarily scandalized by his lapse in character, after some consideration we’d probably come to the conclusion that squeaky clean Mr. Rogers was human after all. But we don’t want to say that about Jesus.

I mentioned before that this story of the Temple cleansing is found in all four gospels. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, this occurs during the final week before Jesus' passion. It is one of the events that leads to the arrest of Jesus, and ultimately to his death. John however, places this event in the Temple at the beginning of his Gospel – chapter 2. Chronology is not important to John - he's not writing a history book. Instead John is more focused on theological implications. For John the Temple cleansing is important for understanding the identity of Jesus, and so he places it toward the beginning of his gospel.

The event takes place during the Jewish Passover. This is a feast, a celebration for the Jewish people that commemorated the liberation of Israel from its slavery in Egypt. People from all over would travel to Jerusalem for this special annual festival. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims would come to the city during this eight-day celebration. A visit to the temple required an unblemished offering, of cattle, sheep or doves. The pilgrims would have to purchase the animals when they arrived and pay the temple tax. Foreign currency was not acceptable, and so moneychangers were needed. The sale of animals and the changing of money was a necessary part of the ritual.

One commentator described the scene as "a bustling nexus of commercial activity, crowds of worshippers, nationalist aspirations, political identity, historical memory, architectural splendor, and of religious affiliation...the temple constituted the essence of Jewish faith in both a literal and symbolic manner." (Dan Clendenin, *The Journey With Jesus: Notes to Myself*, website) The temple was the focal point of the Jewish religion and of Jewish identity.

When Jesus entered into the temple courts with his disciples, he was confronted with beasts for sale and tables set up for the exchange of foreign currency. Suddenly Jesus erupts in anger and all hell breaks loose. After fashioning a whip made out of cords, he drives out the herds of cattle and sheep, screams at the men selling the doves, and then he overturns the tables of the moneychangers.

It's a scene of chaos. Crowds of pilgrims draw back in fear from the crazy fellow who is making such a commotion. His disciples scatter, wondering what on earth has gotten into their teacher. The animal sellers and the moneychangers react with shock, not knowing what might happen next. Some of the people come forward to ask questions. Probably they are leaders at the Temple. They confront Jesus. They demand that Jesus tell them by what authority he thinks he can get away with all this. Who is he to disrupt the Temple activities?

He responds with an intentionally confusing statement. The conversation proceeds on two different levels. He speaks on one, yet they respond on another. He challenges them to destroy this temple, and then he will raise it in three days. We know, because we know the

end of the story, that Jesus is referring to himself. But the people think he is referring to the temple building. How can he presume to think he could restore a destroyed building in such a short time? They don't understand, they cannot yet understand – because to them it is an enigma.

To John's readers it isn't. To the disciples, they will understand later. They will look back at this statement and know to what he was referring. And John tells us. Jesus was referring to the temple of his own body. To the Jewish people the Temple was the place of God's residence. It was a place where sacrifices were offered to God on behalf of the people. It was the focal point of the Jewish religion, the place where God dwelled. But Jesus came to change that perception.

In John's Gospel nothing is hidden about the identity of Jesus. Here in the second chapter, we learn that Jesus himself is the temple. Jesus is the location of God's presence here on earth. And Jesus is to become the new focus of the worship of God. The people gathered there in the Temple that day during Passover wanted to know by what authority did Jesus act, and he points to his own death and resurrection. Biblical scholar Gail O'Day writes, "Jesus has the authority to challenge the authority of the Temple because his whole life bears testimony to the power of God in the world." (The New Interpreter's Bible "John" p. 545)

But that still doesn't really answer the question of why Jesus got so angry at that particular moment. Why did he have to disrupt the worship during one of the most significant festivals of the year? It's not really clear what it was that Jesus specifically objected to. Was he angered by the exploitation that sometimes occurred during the exchanges of money and animals? Overcharging the pilgrims for these services? Was he disgusted that this was occurring right in the Temple courts, disrupting the possibility of prayer and worship?

Perhaps he was fed up with the dynamics of a system in desperate need of reformation. This was not a new challenge. Similar to the Old Testament prophets, like Jeremiah and Amos who challenged religious institutionalism, Jesus reacted not to the Temple itself, but what the Temple had come to represent – power and exploitation. Oppressing the very people the institution was meant to serve. Scholar William Loader suggests that the innocent structures of exchange had become part of a corrupt system. Jesus was not opposed to the Temple in and of itself, but he expressed disapproval over what the Temple had become and alluded to a future without the Temple. (William Loader, First Thoughts, website) Perhaps the sight of the moneychangers and the animal sellers that day was the last straw in his growing dissatisfaction with the status quo. In his abrupt action, Jesus challenges a system so caught up in its own negative practices and policies that it is blind to any new revelation of God.

The institution, stuck in its rules and regulations, stuck in its past, cannot see any other way of existing. And has thus fallen prey to the downside of institutionalism. So when Jesus comes on the scene, challenging the old ways, and overturning the tables of oppression, the ones who uphold the system, the ones wedded to the institution will resist him at every turn. "We've never done that way before and we're not about to start." The ones unwilling to consider change, to think that possibly God might do a new thing, completely missed it. "God is the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow and would never do it like that!" And yet Jesus was standing right before their eyes, offering them a new way.

The Temple was no longer to be a building that housed God. In the Temple sacrifices were made by the priests on behalf of the people, atoning for their sins. But Jesus changed that. Jesus himself was the new Temple. The one who offered the ultimate sacrifice, bridging the gap between God and humanity. God was no longer to be seen tied to a structure of institutional religion. Christ has shown us that by the power of the Holy Spirit, God can be found anywhere and everywhere. We need only open our eyes to see.

But that's the problem. We get caught in a rut. Over time complacency sets in. And we become blinded to new revelations given by the Holy Spirit. And the Christian church is just as susceptible to institutional imbeddedness. Take for instance the actions of reformer Martin Luther. Luther was frustrated with the practices and policies of the Catholic Church. It had become stale and oppressive and no longer served the people it was meant to serve. Luther made a stand against what he saw to be flagrant violations and abuses of power by the Catholic leadership. And out of his public protests, the Protestant Reformation was born.

Our denomination has its roots in the Protestant Reformation and our motto is "Reforming, always being reformed." But unless we really take that motto to heart, and revisit it from time to time, we have the same propensity to become stagnant. Unless we are actually open to the moving of the Holy Spirit, unless we open our hearts and minds and are willing to be reformed, we'll miss the mark as well. By nature human beings dislike change and conflict, even positive conflict. So it is not surprising that many institutions fall into similar traps, spiraling down into ineffectiveness and decline.

As we as a congregation move toward our own future it is always wise for us to engage in our own self-examination. What are some areas for growth for us as we look ahead and attempt to determine what God is calling us to be in this community and world? Perhaps some questions we could ask ourselves might be, what areas in our own ministries have become stagnant? What things are keeping us from fulfilling the mission to which we have been called? If Jesus were to come into this place today, what tables might he overturn?

