

Title: Expanding Our Vocabulary
Text: John 2: 13 -22
Date: March 4, 2018

It should be no surprise that I preached on this passage before, but this will be far from a sermon that I pulled from the file cabinet. I feel inspired to build upon the theme that has been unfolding over the last couple of weeks - first with Jessica Vazquez Torres preaching a couple of weeks ago, and then with Ethel Hornbeck preaching last week. They had been speaking on systemic racism, and so I am sure that some of you are wondering how on earth I am going to relate *that* theme to Jesus' "cleansing the temple."

When I think about how others have approached this passage, I can recall themes being developed relating to Jesus getting angry. With the dominant stereotype of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild," this does seem to be out of character. So, is it OK to get angry? Others have developed themes of worship at the Temple getting tainted by commercialism. There is probably something to be said for both of those directions.

It might be of interest to note that this story appears in the other gospels, but not on the same timeline. In the synoptic gospels the story appears later on in Jesus' ministry – just after he enters Jerusalem. I have the strong suspicion that John *knowingly* took some liberties with the chronology because he was more interested in theology, and saw this story as being important for making a larger point. So why would John move this story to the beginning of the gospel – just after Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding party?

Jesus enters the temple and finds what one would expect during a pilgrimage festival. The vital trades are in place for the necessary exchange of monies, animals, and grains for the required sacrifices. Nothing is out of order at this point. Yet Jesus essentially screams, "**Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!**" (2:16) You see, for the temple system to survive, the ordered transactions of a marketplace were essential. The temple had to function as a place of exchange for maintaining and supporting the sacrificial structures. It was difficult to bring animals without blemish any distance, and so – as a convenience – they were sold at the temple. The Court of the Gentiles sounded like an open-air market. Cattle bellowing, sheep bleating, turtledoves cooing, people yelling, and coins clanging. The temple tax had to be paid in temple coinage, and money changers were necessary.

Entering the temple, Jesus discovered how deceiving appearances can be. While the place *appeared* to fulfill its function, closer inspection revealed that it had forgotten its purpose. The trappings were still in place, but the place had no heart. Ultimately, however, Jesus was not quibbling about little details that needed reforming, but rather he called for *a complete dismantling of the entire system*. Underneath this critique lies also the intimation that the temple itself was not necessary. At the center of such theological statements was the fundamental question of God's *location*. Where is God to be found?

I could easily go on and on with how John develops the subtleties of his case, but rather than getting lost in the weeds, I would invite you to join me in taking a high view of this story, so we can see how it relates to our recent discussions as a church. Since we are pressed for time, let me simply tell you where I am going with this. Rather than this being a story about Jesus being ticked off at Bernie the Moneychanger – the individual – I would invite you to see this as Jesus being enraged at what we might call "systemic evil," or "institutionalized sin." While these were not words they would use then, it seems clear to me that this was what was going on here.

Admittedly these are relatively modern terms, but they are not at all modern problems. While not using this terminology, many of our Old Testament prophets were very much concerned with systemic evil. It probably wasn't until the 1960s that contemporary theologians started developing this thinking. From this point on I want to acknowledge that I have been informed by the thinking of both Richard Rohr and Archbishop Dom Hélder Câmara of Brazil.

Most of us here were raised thinking of sin very much on an individual level: individual failings or transgressions. When Paul talks about "sins of the flesh" we think we get it, and our minds tend to drift into the realm of sexual sins for some reason. It seems that when sin is mentioned, 90% of our thinking goes towards individual sins. When we say "a prayer of confession," we tend to think of individual failings. We are not used to thinking seriously about corporate sin, and so Archbishop Camara contends that *until we learn to understand the nature of institutionalized sin, it will spiral out of control before we can even begin to grapple with individual sin.*

You see the only way that evil can get away with its game is that it has to disguise itself as good. Thinking of this in the context of our discussion on racism, I am reminded of a paper that I wrote in college where I studied sermons that were written in defense of slavery – a practice that we now condemn as horrid. Since this evil did such a masterful job of disguising itself in the time of slavery, some clergy who were immersed in the system were able to defend evil without any shame, or without an ounce of self-doubt. It seemed good! Evil *must* disguise itself! Until and unless Christians start understanding this, their capacity for discernment will remain quite minimal!

We can smugly look back on how Christians defended themselves during the time of slavery, but until we are able to have that same level of discernment regarding the systems that we are a part of, we are no better. Richard Rohr points out that while so many Christians are somehow obsessed with what they see as sexual sin, he has never heard a sermon preached on the 10th commandment: "**You shall not covet.**" We don't preach on it, because it contradicts another system that we are a part of: Capitalism. It is hard to see this, because this is the system that we are immersed in. Even our leaders exalt the value of consumerism! George Bush's primary exhortation to the American people in the aftermath of 9-11 was simply to "go shopping."

You can see now how the one thing that drove Jesus to violence when he entered the temple space was how the spirit of buying and selling had taken over. He knew that when the mercantile class takes over, that that is the death of the religious system. This, however, is the truism: *you cannot critique what you are benefiting from!*

I saw this on display last Thursday when I was visiting with some Christian friends I had not seen in many years. They asked me what Shepherdstown Presbyterian was like and, by way of illustration, I told them how much heart and energy we had invested in the anti-racism weekend a couple of weeks ago. The initial reaction was surprise that this was even still an issue. Isn't all that talk about racism a thing of the past? Aren't we past that? I tried to explain that the focus was not simply on individual attitudes, but on "systemic racism." I pointed out, for example, that rather than improving, the wealth gap between white and black Americans has more than tripled in the past 50 years, and there are *systemic reasons* for why this is so. Someone else said, "Well then, did you talk about the problems created by the lack of black fathers in the family?" At this point I was ready to pull my hair out. Remember this truth: *you cannot critique what you are benefiting from!* These were not *bad* people. These were lovely, good people who were fundamentally blind to the systems that they were a part of, and they had no interest whatsoever in seeing things from a different perspective. Why bother?

We need to expand our vocabulary. We need to be able to look beyond individual naughtiness, to grappling with terms like "structural evil," "corporate evil," "systemic evil," or

“institutionalized sin.” Most of us were not raised to think this way. We have not been able to grasp that there truly is such a thing as “culturally sanctioned oppression.”

We need to expand our ability to identify and talk about systemic issues. The disguise has to look religious . . . even moral. Haven't you heard people talk about the 2nd Amendment using virtually religious language?

Perhaps this is what Paul had in mind when he spoke of the powers, the principalities, the dominations of the world. The thing that is most hidden, most disguised, about this level of evil is the way these institutions and groups organize themselves to survive. There may even be nothing inherently wrong with a given institution, but there is always a move towards self-perpetuation, self-maintenance, self-protection. It is inevitable. All systems protect themselves, so if you think it is hard to unmask individual evil, it is ten times harder to unmask the evil of systems. If you are attempting to unmask racism, for example, it might be hard to find one person in leadership that seems to be truly a bad person. If you want to reform lending practices, it may be hard to find that one person you can hate. Whether it is the realm of banking, or lending, or real estate, or college admissions, any institution has to create their own inner logic, their own inner truth . . . which typically has trouble relating to any larger sense of Truth.

Once you are inside any system – even a church - there are a whole bunch of things you cannot see. These things just aren't a problem for you. They are only a problem for you when you are outside of that system. As a church then, can we train ourselves to see things that are not a problem for us . . . that don't seemingly affect our lives directly? It is not easy, but the prophetic instinct is precisely the ability to self-critique.

There is so much more that could be said. Our well-meaning instincts are to tweak systems and offer little improvements . . . yet today we read of a Jesus who wanted to tear down the whole temple system, and offer something entirely new.

Let me close with some words of *Steve Garraas-Holmes* as he reflected on this passage:

Get rid of all the Stuff,
even religion itself.
Shut down the hubbub.
Enter into the stillness
at the heart of everything,
the Sabbath that is the real temple,
the silence that is God.
Don't run in the sanctuary,
you can't hear the silence when you're busy.

There's no substitute for stillness.
The offering God desires is your presence.
Stop
and wait upon the Beloved.

Breathe. This is the holy of holies.

Destroy the temple of doing
and let the temple of being
rise up from within.

Amen.

John 2: 13 – 22 Jesus Cleanses the Temple

“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 marketplace!” “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.