First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

3/3/24

Good Intentions

John 2:13-22 - NRSV

**13**The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. **14**In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves and the money changers seated at their tables. **15**Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, with the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. **16**He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” **17**His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” **18**The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” **19**Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” **20**The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” **21**But he was speaking of the temple of his body. **22**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.

As we move closer to Easter, the lectionary shifts from the gospel of Mark to the gospel of John. For whatever reason in these last few weeks of Lent, Western Christianity tends to focus on John’s Passion narrative, in spite of the fact that we have other versions we could use. This, of course, is problematic for some who see John’s words as hostile towards those of the Jewish faith, even to the point of being blatantly antisemitic. We will take up the issue of antisemitism in the New Testament at a later date, but today I’ll be focusing on John’s version of what I’ll refer to as the “Temple Incident.”

In this passage, the writer of John has placed the familiar narrative of Jesus cleansing the Temple prior to the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and immediately following Jesus’ first miracle at Cana. Unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke, who all place this event at the end of Jesus’ ministry, John places it towards the beginning.

Jesus and his disciples have gone to Jerusalem for Passover. In Jesus’ day, this was one of the three times a year that all Jews were expected to make a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem, in order to fulfill their religious obligations.

I imagine that the journey to the Holy City has been long and tiring; Jerusalem is way too crowded, way too hot and way too smelly. Jesus is probably a bit out of sorts, and who could blame him? If you’ve ever been to a festival, where there are thousands of people all jammed into a relatively small space, having to wait in long lines to get food and drink, or use the facilities, you might be able to relate here. Not being a huge fan of large crowds, myself, I can see where this situation might have caused Jesus some discomfort.

When Jesus finally works his way through the crowds of pilgrims and gets to the temple, he really doesn’t see anything out of the ordinary. Karoline Lewis, Professor of Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, writes, *“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. The narration happens in real time, as if the reader can see everything that Jesus sees.” Yet, Jesus’ command to the dove sellers differs strikingly from the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Instead of a concern for temple malpractices, Jesus orders that God’s house not be made a marketplace. For the temple system to survive, however, 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. “Jesus is not quibbling about maleficence or mismanagement but calls for a complete dismantling of the entire system.”*

John paints a much more sympathetic picture of the merchants than the narratives we find in the synoptic gospels. The money changers were there because the system only allowed the purchase of the necessary items, for temple rituals, to be made in temple coinage, so folks had to change their money. The vendors were there to make it easier to acquire the appropriate animals and grains needed for sacrifice, because who wants to have to haul sacks of grain, doves, lambs and bulls around an overcrowded city during Passover? The temple merchants were all acting with good intentions; they weren’t doing anything wrong, per se and were only there to facilitate the required temple worship. The marketplace that had existed for a very long time was, as Professor Lewis notes, essential for the survival of the temple system.

Looking at it this way, then, Jesus’ anger is shifted away from individuals who, in the other narratives, are acting in ways that take advantage of the piety of those who have come to worship, and places it squarely on the system itself.

Systems, whether they are political, or religious, always start out with good intentions. They are put in place to serve a higher purpose. Yet, over time, they too often morph into something that has little to no resemblance to their founder’s original intent. The Temple marketplace was meant to make it easier for folks to focus on worship when, in reality, it had become a distraction, and ultimately a barrier to, the Temple’s true purpose. This is what Jesus was objecting to.

As Presbyterians, we are well acquainted with systems put in place which are meant to enhance our growth as followers of Jesus. We form committees, and more committees, and even more committees, organizing ourselves and our work in ways that are all meant to support the idea of doing everything “decently and in order.”

Have you all heard the joke about how many Presbyterians it takes to change a lightbulb? Well, in order to change a lightbulb, we have to form a committee to decide if we need a committee to determine if the lightbulb really needs to be changed and then, after the recommendation is made to change the lightbulb, we need another committee to decide what type of lightbulb to buy and then we’ll need to form another committee to decide who will do the work of changing the lightbulb..

While this joke does take it to the extreme, there is a grain of truth, here. When we get so wrapped up in the systems; in doing things “decently and in order,” it can become a distraction to our true purpose.

Many of my colleagues bemoan the fact that so much of our time, as church leaders, is spent on what can politely be described as “church politics.” We argue and debate over where meetings are held, and what the agenda of those meetings should be. We struggle with the bureaucracy that is part of any large institution. We simply accept that this as just part of being the church. And, more often than not, we work diligently to preserve the institution, at the expense of sharing the good news of the gospel. I’ll admit, that I have enthusiastically engaged in those efforts, and I have discovered that I’m pretty good at church politics. So, perhaps, this sermon is as much for me as it is for you.

Jesus’ anger was directed at a system that started out with good intentions, but had morphed and changed into something far beyond its original purpose. When we spend all of our energy preserving a structure or a system; when our only focus is the preservation of the past, then we don’t have the time or the energy to actually do the work of caring for the poor, providing freedom to the captives and working for justice for those on the margins.

To be clear, the work of dismantling systems, which are only interested in self-preservation, is not without risk. Several commentaries on the Temple incident, note that for the Pharisees, and other religious authorities, Jesus’ actions were the final straw which convinced them that the only way they could preserve their own corrupt systems, and the power that those systems gave them, was to have Jesus executed. Jesus knew this and yet, that didn’t stop him.

There are two ways we can respond to these situations. We can either throw up our hands, disengage and walk away, or we can take the risk; the same risk Jesus took, and do the hard work to change the status quo for the better.

I believe we cannot ignore the status quo of broken systems, while waiting and hoping that someone else will take care of the problem, or that it will simply vanish on its own. I believe we are called by God to shine light on the darkness of inertia and bureaucracy, within the church, which does not serve the purpose of the gospel. I believe we are called by God to work to fix what’s broken in the church and in society. And I believe we are called by God to follow Jesus’ example, regardless of the cost. When Jesus encountered such systems, he didn’t hesitate to take action. Can we do any less? AMEN