

“Confronting the Frailty of the Institution”

John 2:13-22

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Robert Frost said he had a lover’s quarrel with the world and it is apparent in his poetry that he did. He loved the world and quarreled with it as only one who truly loves it can. In like manner, I have often said that I have a lover’s quarrel with the church. I love the church deeply. If I did not, I would not have given my life to it. But I quarrel with the church when it is less than it can be, when it is other than it should be, when it contributes to the suffering of the world rather than seeking to alleviate it. My occasional critique does not mean I do not love the church. It means there is a tension between my affirmation of the church the way it is and my desire to see it move further toward the images of the beloved community we find in Holy Scripture.

There is a similar tension in the biblical texts we have read today. In Exodus 20 we find an affirmation of the covenant community, as God establishes commandments for the people to live by. But in John 2 we find evidence that the covenant community needs to evolve periodically, as we meet Jesus cleaning house in the temple. Clearly the institution of the covenant community is desired by God, but just as clearly it is in need of constant revision, which means a part of the challenge of discipleship involves confronting the frailty of the institution.

In Jesus’ act of cleansing the temple, we see that the institution can have flaws. It is a familiar story found in all four gospels, though in the other three it comes near the end of Jesus’ ministry. But no matter how many times we hear the story, it never fails to startle us. Jesus is really angry, and seeing this, we realize we don’t want to do anything to make him this angry, but to avoid doing so, we need to know what angers him.

In another church I served, we had a member who knew what upset Jesus. It was changing money in the temple. So, he argued that we should not change money in the church. What upset him most was

Wednesday Night Suppers. People brought money and paid for their meals, which seems necessary, but this man was convinced that it was wrong and quit coming to church. And his name was Moses!

But is this Jesus' concern? John's version of this story doesn't establish a clear rationale, though Jesus does say, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace." But faithful worshipers in the temple system have to offer sacrifices and many travel too far to bring their animals. The availability of animals for purchase could be viewed as a worship aid. As someone has pointed out, removing the vendors completely would be like cutting off the power to a basketball arena. The game would come to a stop, as would worship without sacrifices.

No, the issue is with vendors taking advantage of the poor, overcharging them. We know this from the other gospel accounts wherein Jesus, quoting the prophet Jeremiah, says they have turned a house of prayer into a den of robbers. So, Jesus cracks a whip, turns over their tables and throws them out along with their animals who are probably "O.K." with this! Clearly Jesus is angry. He believes there are flaws in the covenant community; there is frailty in the institution.

We see evidence of this frailty to this day. The church in every generation, being a human institution, has flaws. Sometimes the flaws are unintentional. We exclude people through careless language, lack of access, insider talk and terminology. We fail to respond to certain needs because of our lack of awareness, misplaced priorities and busyness.

Other times the flaws result from unhealthy systems. Systems theory tells us good people can do some not-so-good things together. Perhaps our shared life is organized in a way that does not free the greatest energy for the things that matter most. Some traditions enrich our experience while others mire us down in the plough mud of life.

But sometimes the flaws are intentional. It wasn't that long ago that most churches refused leadership roles to women; some still do. It wasn't that long ago that most churches treated divorced people like they were outcast; and sadly some still do. It wasn't that long ago that many churches refused to welcome persons of color. In fact, I know a church an hour from here that voted in the 1980's not to baptize a fourteen-year-old girl who made a profession of faith at Vacation Bible School

because of the color of her skin. And though many churches have made strides towards openness vis a vis race, most have little diversity.

Furthermore, it is still the case that most churches treat addictions like a moral problem rather than an illness, mental health issues like a fabricated excuse rather than a documented disease, LGBT concerns like a political landmine rather than a pastoral concern. What must Jesus think?! As in his day, the covenant community still has many flaws.

But in Jesus' act of cleansing the temple, we not only see that the institution has flaws; we find an example of how to confront the flaws. Once Jesus sees what is wrong, he takes decisive action. He drives out the animals with a whip and sets things right. Some say he isn't angry, but this seems absurd. The worship of God is being abused, vulnerable people are being exploited and Jesus is cracking a whip, herding animals out of the temple and turning over the tables of the moneychangers! Is he angry? He is furious, filled with righteous indignation!

Yet Jesus does not call for the destruction of the temple. He does not call for an end to the institution. Later, on the cross, he will act more decisively in a way that will shape both the nature of the covenant community and its worship, but for now he is trying to cleanse the temple, clean house, not burn it down. He is trying to reform worship.

We need to be careful as to how we follow Jesus' example at this point. Our anger is not always as righteous as his, our vision of how things ought to be is not always so clear and thus, our attempts to reform the church are not always on-target. Sometimes we may want to change the very thing God would have us to leave alone while other times we may resist the change that is needed. Yet there are times when we see real flaws, times when we need to speak and act decisively.

If a flaw is unintentional, the best course of action may be to call attention to it gently and seek to build up the church in love. With awareness and education, we can pay more attention to language and space and make the church more inclusive. If a flaw is the result of an unhealthy system, we might act to improve the system, find a new structure or process through which to tap into our desire to grow in Christ and follow his example of service.

If, however, a flaw grows out of an intentional wrong, more decisive action may be required. The challenge is no individual or church acts in a way he/she/they think is wrong. The merchants selling animals think they are in the right. The temple priests have blessed their work. Neither group is thrilled with Jesus' actions. Nor will those we challenge be thrilled. But sometimes faithfulness requires a willingness to confront those who are using the church to do harm.

In the community where the teenager was refused baptism, the pastor and other leaders confronted the church and tried to convince them to change their hearts. When the church refused, the pastor and some others left and started a new church that welcomed all beginning with that teenager. As in the day of Jesus, the frailty of the covenant community today sometimes calls us to speak and act decisively.

There is one other thing we see in Jesus' act of cleansing the temple. Whenever we quarrel with the covenant community and draw attention to the flaws, questions of authority arise. When Jesus cleanses the temple, the religious leaders of the day demand a sign to prove that he has a right to do so. There is a brief exchange about the temple wherein Jesus speaks in veiled terms about his resurrection and the Jewish leaders misunderstand, but what is at issue here is authority. Jesus has attacked a practice of an institution and those who run things want to know what gives him the right! It is a reasonable question, and Jesus answers it, but the temple authorities are not convinced.

I would suggest that the question of authority is still appropriate. Who has the right to quarrel with the church and call attention to its flaws? The answer seems to be, "Anyone and everyone!" for the right to complain seems to have become an inalienable right. The answer of scripture might seem to be, "No one!" for who has the wisdom of Jesus to know what needs to be done? A more reasonable answer might be, "Whoever loves the church!" We cannot have a lover's quarrel unless we are in love and we cannot critique something we do not understand.

I remember a passionate yet unsettled young man who attended another church I served. He visited a Sunday School Class a few times and then pointed out all that was wrong with the church, that church and

the church universal. He said he wanted to start something new and asked people to join him. A wise older woman in his class said, “So and so, you haven’t been in any church long enough to know what you think of it. Stick around for a while, get involved, invest yourself. Then, you are welcome to your opinion. Now you’re just making noise.”

While the insight of an outsider might have value, only an insider can see the church through the eyes of love, with a sense of investment, with a desire to see it grow. There are those who attack the church in ignorance, cynicism and disgust. And there are those who quarrel out of love and affection. These are the ones who follow in the steps of Jesus.

In his book *The Secret of Victorious Living* Harry Emerson Fosdick developed a metaphor for the church.

Beethoven wrote music which could not adequately be rendered on the instruments of his time, music which, therefore, in itself was a prayer: Give me instruments, create for me instruments so I can really be played. Suppose that you, devoutly believing in Beethoven, had heard the C Minor Concerto at its first rendition. You would have known, would you not, that that could not possibly be the end of the story; that though it might be a long time from Beethoven to Toscanini and the Philharmonic, yet the music would bring to pass at last an orchestra which could play it properly. So, we who deeply believe in Christ and hear his music being ruined... know that this is not the end of the story. Underline this in your faith; the future belongs to the music, not to these wretched, obsolete instruments.

It is an appropriate image for the frail institution we know as the church, not because it calls attention to the frailty, but because it calls attention to the nobility that exists amidst the flaws. In the end, this is how we confront the frailty. We know that the music of salvation is glorious and we know that the future belongs to the music, so we are willing to give everything we have to improve our parts!