

## **“It’s Not About Wednesday Night Suppers”**

**John 2:13–22**

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A man in another church I served took our reading from John 2 seriously, literally, and mistakenly. The trouble was his name was Moses, so it was difficult to argue with him. Moses would not come to Wednesday night suppers because he said we were doing exactly what made Jesus angry — changing money in the temple! We were accepting payment for the meal at the church. He did not understand the text.

John describes a scene wherein Jesus walks into the temple in Jerusalem and finds people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. The animals are there to be sold to the faithful for ritual sacrifice. Many have come from long distances, and it is easier to buy an animal than bring one. The moneychangers are there because the temple tax of a half-shekel cannot be paid in Roman denarii or Attic drachmas. These coins have to be exchanged for legal Tyrian coinage. Since there are no ATMs, some good folk show up to make the exchange, for a profit, too much of one.

In the other Gospel accounts, Jesus says the temple has become a den of robbers. The money changers are taking advantage of people, perhaps the animal vendors as well. People come with a desire to worship God, while the institution allows merchants to exploit their need for financial gain, and in the process, puts up barriers to worship.

The church where Moses was a member didn’t do any of this. The people enjoyed a wonderful meal for a low price. No one was being exploited. No barriers to worship were put up. Money was changing hands, but not in a way that violated Jesus’ teaching. Paying for Wednesday night suppers is not what this text is about, but what is its significance for us? There is a message here.

Some say the story is more about Christology than ecclesiology. It is more about who Jesus is than how the church should function. Our

tendency has been to focus on the institution, what is wrong with temple practice in Jesus' time, and by implication, what needs attention in the church today. And there is value in this focus, but there are central claims about who Jesus is in this story that we should not miss.

One claim is that Jesus is not afraid to challenge authorities. Think about how we might respond if someone who is not a member of our church, someone who has never had any formal theological training, walked into this sanctuary during worship and started telling us what is wrong with what we are doing, while turning over tables and throwing hymnals! What would we do? It might depend on how threatening the person was, whether they were armed. We might approach the person and ask them to calm down or call in our police officer immediately!

Jesus has no formal authority to enter the temple and start tearing the place apart. This is why the temple leaders John refers to as "the Jews" — an unfortunate choice since he does not mean all Jews — ask Jesus to show them a sign for throwing out the moneychangers and animal vendors. By what authority is he doing this? Who gave him the right?! Jesus is taking a risk here, but that does not stop him from confronting injustice, now or any other time.

We should note that while this story comes near the beginning of John, it probably takes place where the other Gospels locate it, near the end of Jesus' ministry. If he had done this at the beginning of his ministry, he would not have lasted three years! John's narrative isn't always chronological, though he's not exactly James Joyce either, his style is not stream of consciousness.

Some years ago, when Dana and I were in the British Library in London, we saw on exhibit a handwritten outline for *Finnegans Wake*. One thing I observed was that Joyce's handwriting was as bad as mine. But more to the point, he outlined a story in straightforward fashion and then added lines and arrows, indicating how he would mess with the sequence of events and thus the reader. More generously, we might say he arranged the flow in a creative way to achieve a purpose.

This is what John does. In placing this scene at the beginning of his story, he gives us a preview of coming attractions. Jesus will stand

up to the authorities of his time, regardless of the consequences. He will stand up for what is right, and as his followers, so will we.

In the contemporary church it is often assumed that we should avoid all matters that make anyone uncomfortable. We don't want to offend anyone, we don't want to stir the waters, but for followers of Jesus to witness injustice and remain quiet out of some misplaced sense of keeping the peace is pure folly. If someone is being mistreated or held back because of the color of their skin or their national origin, their identity or religious beliefs, Jesus people stand up and speak out. By what authority do we do this? Jesus of Nazareth, the one who turns over tables and drives out oppressors with a whip of cords!

But there is another claim made about Jesus in this story. When asked for a sign, Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The temple leaders don't understand. They think he is talking about the worship space which they say has taken forty-six years to construct. While Jesus is living, it hasn't been completed, but by the time John is writing, it has and then been destroyed by the Romans.

But Jesus isn't talking about a building. He is talking about himself, his death and resurrection. He will be the new temple. In the words of George Beasley-Murray, he will be the place where the glory of God is revealed, where forgiveness and renewal are experienced, where fellowship with God is grounded and maintained forever. These things used to take place in the Jerusalem temple. Now they will take place in Christ. The temple leaders don't understand. If they did, they would lock him up immediately! This is an outrageous claim!

But it lies at the heart of our faith. We believe that God is found not simply in one sacred building, though this sanctuary and our memories attached to it evoke a sense of the Holy. God is found in our relationship with the Living Christ. We believe that God works not through one chosen nation, be that Israel or the U.S. or another nation. God works through a Son named Jesus. He is the one with the authority to challenge all others, and he is the new temple, the new focus of faith.

The story tells us a great deal about Jesus, but as we have noted, it also says something about the church. Jesus is not criticizing Judaism as

a whole or rejecting the sacrificial system at this point. Christianity will become its own faith and move beyond Judaism, but this won't happen for hundreds of years. Jesus is criticizing the way the system is being used to exploit people rather than enabling them to express faith. The implication for us is a word of warning about any religion that loses sight of its purpose and ends up using people for its own benefit.

Historically, the church used guilt to control and exploit people. Threatening folks with eternal damnation was an effective way of getting them to contribute money, confess certain beliefs, and conform to a way of life. That is less effective now, but guilt is still used in many contexts to shape behavior. The trouble is those who use guilt rarely follow their own requirements of purity, and what upset Jesus more than anything else was hypocrisy. There are things for which we should feel guilty, but the church's calling therein is to extend grace.

In my last setting, there was an odd pattern of some people moving back and forth between our church and another Baptist church with very different theology. A member of our church said that when these folks felt like they needed to be beaten up emotionally, they went to this other church. When they needed to be loved, they came back to us.

It is difficult to imagine anyone needing to be beaten up, but sometimes people feel this way. It's a kind of functional atonement, but it's not very effective. People go to church to be yelled at for being bad, and then return to doing bad things, only to be yelled at again. I'm thankful that this is a church that extends love rather than beating up people, because love is what the church is called to share, and love is what transforms people.

Jesus got angry with the money changers, animal vendors, and temple leaders who benefitted from their presence. I suspect he is angry with those who seek to exploit and control people in his name today. This story isn't about paying for food on Wednesday nights. It's about something far more important — who Jesus is and who he calls us to be. He is the one with the authority to demand justice and the ability to connect people with the Holy, and he calls us to follow him in shaping the kind of community where all are welcomed and extended grace.