

## Temple Cleaning: Authority & Untamed Wisdom

A sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 and John 2:13-22 for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

When I'm down at school, I attend the Presbyterian Church in Saint Cloud. The pastor there likes to start his sermons with a prayer that anything true may be engraved on every heart, and everything false or even misleading may be quickly forgotten and cause no harm. This is an apology, a warning, but it also happens to be true. It is the case that both truth and falsehood are going to come through because of the paradoxical nature of theology.

The passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians that we just read attempts to make sense of what is ultimately beyond what makes sense. God's wisdom can seem like foolishness. Even that which saves us does a stunning impersonation of a stumbling block. Paradox abounds in theology, It seems whenever someone tries to definitively say something, you realize that something else seemingly contradictory is also, somehow, true.

We see this in what the lectionary holds or today. On the one hand, there is the Gospel in which Jesus is rebellious and reacting against the Temple sacrifices. On the other, it is paired with texts that seem to say just follow the rules. We didn't read the OT lesson – but for today it is the Ten Commandments. Follow the rules. What I did sneak in was the Psalm the lectionary recommends – the 19<sup>th</sup> which we sung as our gathering hymn. This Psalm praises the Law as being perfect: “more to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.” It is good to know what God wants so that we can do it. It is good to be obedient and follow the rules.

The thing is, part of those rules, the Law, do call for animal sacrifice, requiring that animals are available for people to fulfill this obligation. It is pretty clear from Jesus' actions that he has a vision of the temple which is quite different from a glorified slaughterhouse. Now Jesus doesn't break any of the commandments here in the strictest sense, but he also doesn't appear to be behaving as most pious Jews of the first century would.

It may help to keep in mind what Jesus says repeatedly throughout John – that he came not to do his will, but the will of the one who sent him, that is, God the Father. If anyone has the right to a fit of rage in the Temple – this is the guy. He knows that God wants a different sort of sacrifice in a different sort of temple. And he is going to do what God wants regardless of what tradition prescribes.

Still, following God isn't the easiest thing. In Psalm 19 one of the chief reasons the Law is so great is that it lays out what God wants so living a good life comes down to matter of doing what you're told. It's not quite so easy for us, especially in our Reformed Tradition. Jack

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Rodgers writes in *Reading the Bible and Confessions – the Presbyterian Way* with specific reference to the question of dealing with the government:

“It is not easy being a Presbyterian. Some churches and religious movements assert that one ought always obey the government, without exception; others distrust the government and say it ought always be opposed. For Presbyterians, it is always a judgment call” (61).

He echoes this throughout the book, it applies to more than just the government. You can't just follow orders without discerning them prayerfully.

You may have heard the advice to always ask yourself “What would Jesus do?” Well, given the gospel reading today, it seems that turning over tables and chasing people with a whip are technically within the realm of possibilities.

Jesus' actions, being on the violent side, bear some consideration. Here, he is a disruptive force. His disciples describe it as “zeal” - picking up on Psalm 69 in which the Psalmist is lamenting the fact that his zeal for God has made him dangerous enemies. In this “zeal” Jesus gets angry and even violent. I'm reminded of how the mighty lion Aslan, the Christ figure in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* is described. “Safe? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn't safe. But he is good.”<sup>1</sup> “He's not a tame lion you know.”<sup>2</sup>

But to consider it as merely Jesus showing the wildness of God would be to miss a lot, like, the point of the story.

The really curious thing about the story is the aftermath, or the lack of it. You might have expected Jesus to really have gotten into trouble here, yet if he did we aren't really told. He gets a reaction certainly. The text says that the Jews responded to him, and asked him “What sign do you show us that you do these things?” Their tone isn't provided, but it doesn't seem overly upset. Later on, when Jesus goes back to Galilee he is welcomed by people who were in Jerusalem and saw the signs he did there. This episode isn't mentioned explicitly, but it doesn't seem to be a deterrent to people wanting to associate with him. All they ask for is a sign, or perhaps, an interpretation of his action.

Paul wouldn't be surprised - as he mentions, “the Jews ask for a sign” - parallel to “the Greeks seek wisdom.”

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, C. S., and Pauline Baynes. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. New York: Scholastic, 1995, 80.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* 182.

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Jesus explains this “foolishness of God” with a Command: “Tear down this Temple” with the claim that he would raise it in three days.

It sort of seems like a non-sequitor, and the Jews don't take him seriously - they know enough about building things that it would probably take more than three days. The Temple they're standing in was built in the duration of 46 years. No one understands the part John helpfully makes explicit, that he was speaking of the Temple of his body. Even his disciples only piece this together after the resurrection.

Perhaps one would say that he is speaking metaphorically, however, it may pay off to consider this a little more literally. A Temple, especially in near eastern culture, is the place where God is thought to dwell. Divinity is dwelling among humanity in his very person. At this point, Jesus is the Temple. The Gospel of John was written not that long after the Temple - the building in Jerusalem - was destroyed, and it was extra important to avoid a reliance on such a building. But even without that context, John makes it clear that Divinity lives in the Temple that is Christ.

Before, I said this seemed non-sequitor. The episode of rage in the Temple and the confusing discussion about how long it takes to build a Temple don't seem to follow, except through John's insight that the Temple is his body.

This is what Jesus does when he enters a place he intends to make his home. If something is going to house divinity - it needs to be cleansed - this makes perfect sense in Jewish thought. It also means in Christian thought, that if Christ is to live in us and us in him, he may demand some house cleaning - one of the reasons this text often comes up during lent, which can be seen as a season of more intense Christian living, with many people fasting, giving things up, giving alms, and giving more time to devotional practices of prayer and scripture reading - usually to the extent we would have a hard time maintaining all year. Let's face it, taking this seriously even through a short period is rather difficult.

It's why we ask for God's help. Twice today we already prayed for this in song. Lord Prepare me to be a sanctuary...a living sanctuary for you. Take my life and let it be, consecrated, Lord, for thee. What we do is God working in us, and he is no tame lion. But he is good.

Even if trying to figure him out is impossible.

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Another paradox then would be our attempt to say anything like what we are about to say in the Creed. What I'll say on that note is that the creation of this creed was actually to prevent people from saying too much and making a horrible mess of things. That being said, let's reflect on where our fourth-century forbearers felt the boundaries of our belief lie.

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, light from light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the  
Virgin Mary  
and became truly human.  
For our sake he was crucified under  
Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again

in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the  
Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the  
living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord,  
the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father [and the  
Son],  
who with the Father and the Son is  
worshiped and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and  
apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the  
forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come.

Amen.