

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
16 January 2022

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
Third Sunday after Epiphany

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

## ***“Anger & Outrage with a Side of Daring Truth”***

Second Sermon in the Eight-week Series: *What Jesus Serves Up*

*John 2:13-25*

New Revised Standard Version

Philosopher, public intellectual, and university professor Dr. Cornell West, has said (on many occasions): *“Justice is what love looks like in public...”*<sup>1</sup>

Dr. West expanded upon this well-known quote during a speech at Howard University in April 2011 saying, “People want to be popular and comfortable, they don’t have the courage to tell the truth...Everybody is smiling while people are getting crushed from dilapidated housing, the prison industrial complex, depression-like levels of unemployment, the way we terrorize one another, and the way we put each other down... We smile and push things under the rug, sharing in ‘deodorized discourse,’” as West says, “which ‘masquerades as courtesy’ but is truly motivated by the desire to remain comfortable”<sup>2</sup> [instead of the divine call to be courageous.

“Justice is what love looks like in public.”

Do you know what inspired this quote from Cornell West? Our very text today.

For West, the paragon of truth was Jesus of Nazareth. “Jesus overturned market stalls in the Temple. Jesus could not tolerate traders swindling people out of their money on holy ground. [And] he was tortured and executed for his countercultural message. Yet even during his trial his message never waivered. He was unapologetic”<sup>3</sup> [in his truth telling...he loved us enough to tell the truth love and in his moral courage].

“Justice is what love looks like in public.”

The story we read today is told in all four gospels. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus overturns

<sup>1</sup> Takim Williams, “#InContext: Cornel West,” *Human Trafficking Institute* (22 Feb. 2017), accessed on Jan. 16, 2022 at <https://www.traffickinginstitute.org/incontext-cornel-west/>.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Williams, *ibid.*

the tables in the Temple at the *end* of his public ministry, and the context is such that in those gospels we are to read this act as the one that finally pushed the Powers That Be over the edge, leading to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion.

But John, places this story *at the beginning* of Jesus' public ministry. Right after Jesus performs (quite privately and behind the scenes) a miracle of turning water into wine at a family wedding in the village of Cana, we find Jesus in the big city of Jerusalem for Passover – in as public a place as you could get – the Temple during a festival – and he is serving up anger and outrage at the sight of moneychangers who are abusing their power and positions for profit. It is a different kind of miracle, isn't it? It's the miracle of someone actually looking at something and seeing that it is Not Okay and choosing to Say Something and Do Something about it Right Then and There – rather than being polite or choosing to handle this on Another Day, in Another Way.

In Cana, if Jesus revealed a key part of his identity of the Word made Flesh – that God came to us in our humanity to show us how to live abundantly and well,

with joy and celebration – then here in Jerusalem, Jesus reveals another key part of his identity – that God came to us in our humanity to show us how it is not okay for *only some* to live abundantly and well – and *not all*.

Jesus shows us that Passover is not just in the past. It is not enough to have been passed over by the Angel of Death in Egypt and delivered from enslavement and into freedom, only to now have your ancestors living in a system that continues to pass over them and time again – economically exploiting and taking advantage of these pilgrimaging people who are just seeking to be faithful. And all this is happening for what? For the sake of some extra change in the pockets of a few in power?

No, this is not okay, Jesus says.

Jesus serves anger and outrage and a side of daring truth – and the Daring Truth is this: that people are more important than profits. And buildings, for that matter – even ones that've been under construction for 46 years and counting.

So what is going on this story? Why is Jesus so angry? Well, in

Deuteronomy 14:22-27, we read that the people of God are told that they've gotta go and make pilgrimage for the big festivals, and they've gotta bring their tithe, or their offering, to sacrifice, BUT if you live so far away that bringing your offering (a sheep or ox, for example) is just really not feasible, then you can sell that animal in your own town for silver, and make the journey to the festival and then use that silver when you get there to buy the animal you need for the sacrifice.<sup>4</sup>

So, this has been the system for years and the people are just doing what the law of Moses says. Right? Right.

Except. This practice had been going on so long that the moneychangers had gradually let greed get the best of them. They knew that the people from the countryside had no choice but to buy their sacrifice from them, so the prices had gotten higher and higher. This was no longer about ensuring that the most people possible could worship at Passover, this was about ensuring that the most money possible was made off of Passover.

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<sup>4</sup> Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Kathryn Schifferdecker, "NL Podcast 478: Jesus Cleanses the Temple - Jan. 16, 2022," *Narrative Lectionary* (10 Jan. 2022), accessed on Jan. 16, 2022 at

In fact, when Jesus yells, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" the Greek word used for marketplace is *emporium*, which was a major trading center – a mega mall, if you will. An emporium is where you'd have lots of merchants and lots of activity for which profit was the driving force. And Jesus is saying, no that is not the Value of my Father's house, or rather, the Values of my Father.<sup>5</sup> Greed has no place in the dwelling of God.

A couple important things to note here. Jesus is not anti-Temple. In fact, he's pro-Temple, right? He calls the Temple *his Father's house* – which not only directly reveals the intimacy with which he sees himself as connected to God but also reveals how he sees his body as related to the building as *he* is the "new Tabernacle," of God's presence, the new dwelling place of God's presence. This refers even back to John 1:14 when John writes, "*the Word became flesh and dwelled among us*" the literally translation of that text is "*the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us*" – it's the

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/478-jesus-cleanses-the-temple-jan-16-2022>.

<sup>5</sup> Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

same root word, and it's reminding us that in the Old Testament, God met God's people in the Tabernacle, the place where they believed God's presence resided.

And this ties into the whole conversation at the end of today's passage – Jesus helping them see that it is his body that will be destroyed that will raise up in three days – again John foreshadowing the crucifixion and resurrection. And remember, John's gospel was written in the very late first century...so it would have been AFTER the second Temple was destroyed in 70 AD...he's writing to give his people hope and explain that the destruction of the Temple that has taken place, is not the destruction of God's presence – God's presence lives on – first in the person of Jesus, and now in the living spirit of Christ – which dwells in them as Christ followers. Like I said last week – there are many multi-layers of meaning in every passage of John's gospel!

Back to the immediate context of the text. This was not the first Passover festival. The money changers had been in the Temple precincts for years. This whole system of Temple

sacrifice had built up since back in Deuteronomy 14! So we're talking about generations upon generations of systemic structure. No matter the intentions at inception, there had been more than enough time for corruption to develop and deepen and solidify into the scariest edifice of all: which is, I think, the sentiment, "This Is Just How It's Done (how it's always been done)." Never mind the people it leaves undone.

My question is this: if it's so very clear that these moneychangers are abusing their position and situation for profits (clear enough that Jesus can take one look at them and know that what they are doing is not right and flies off the handle in a fit of rage) then why is Jesus the first person that we hear about getting so angry? Why is he the only one turning the tables? Why hasn't someone else – a well, intentioned good person of faith – done this already? It was Passover after all – there were well, intentioned, good people of faith all over the place!

It seems to me that this must mean that:

- 1) People knew this wasn't right and just walked by these tables, festival after festival, and didn't say anything or worse yet, participated in the system of getting profits at the expense of people – knowing it was wrong

Or

- 2) People had become so accustomed to the money changing tables at these festivals and their exorbitant prices that they just passed by them or even bought animals from them and didn't even know how unjust the whole thing was. They had either acclimated to the injustice gradually, or perhaps were born into the world with it already existing and didn't even know, or see, just how unjust and unfair it was.

Which is worse?

- To see an injustice and know it as such and not saying anything?
- Or, to be so used to an injustice in your society – so normalized to it – that you just walk by it (or even participate in it) and don't even see it as Not Right, Not

Okay? Or recognize the harm that it is causing people, and maybe even yourself?

Jesus is serving up anger and outrage here so that we might actually wake up and notice that Something Is Not Right, right in our very midst. The truth that Jesus dares us to stake our lives on is that the Spirit of God dwells in him, in a person, and not in a building or physical structure or profitable enterprise.

What does it mean for God's spirit, and therefore the power of God's presence, to dwell within PEOPLE – and not within structures or systems?

I think it means that we must be willing, just as Jesus was, to put people over profits – at all costs. This is going to be very disruptive to our lives. There is no way around it. We've put profits over people for too long – to change that priority – is to change the heartbeat of our economic system. To be clear, this is not about stifling entrepreneurialism. This is about creating an equitable playing field where all people have an equal chance at getting to be an entrepreneur...at getting to dream and create...because their basic

needs are met. You cannot dream if you have no safe place to sleep. You can't create if the daily stress of food, shelter, employment is crowding your life.

So putting people over profits will be disruptive. More disruptive than Jesus turning over a few tables in the Temple. It will require sacrifice for many of us. It's no accident that at the very place where sacrifices are made (the Temple). In this very place Jesus teaches us that his very life will become a sacrifice. He did not choose comfort over courage, and we cannot either.

*“The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used to ask civil rights leadership in the South, ‘Do you have your cemetery clothes on?’ In their commitment to nonviolent protest, they were literally unarmed in a system hostile to their existence. He was asking them to be prepared to die for the truth.”<sup>6</sup>*

This was not about wanting to die or even fear of death; it was about fighting against that which was already killing them...Power Structures which denied People rights – Systems that prized profits over people.

On April 4, 1967, a year to the day before he was assassinated, Rev. Dr. King gave an address titled *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence* to a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam at Riverside Church in New York City, which is to say – he was speaking to fellow people of faith. He reflected:

*“The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit...I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing-oriented” society to a “person-oriented” society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered.*

*A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on*

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, *ibid.*

*life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway.*

*True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth...*

*...A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”<sup>7</sup>*

It seems to me that the same economic tables that Jesus was turning in his day are the same ones that King was turning in his day and that we are to keep turning in our day.

“Justice is what love looks like in public.”

Jesus flipped over those marketplace tables in public. At

Passover. He did not pull them aside to a private room and say, “Hey, can you please stop doing this?” Whatever he saw made him angry enough to do something about it then and there. And it was in a place of faith, not “out in the world” as we so often like to locate problems. Getting angry is not un-Christian. In this text, Anger is not the sin; Silence is.

Jesus' ministry was messy because it was meaningful. He put people over profits, people over politeness, people over long-held policies and customs and rules. He put people over patterns of living that separated and excluded. He put people over perfect belief. Jesus put People over Everything – which is the point, I think, of John continually showing us these signs of revelation – of how Jesus embodied the full glory and presence of God. God meets us in the person of Jesus not just because Jesus was God's beloved son but because as met people he treated them as if they were God's beloved child too.

You know, King is almost always lauded for human rights and civil rights and racial

<sup>7</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence” is among the writings of Dr. King compiled by James Melvin Washington and

published under the title, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1986).

justice, but most scholars agree that this is not what got him killed. It's when he started talking about money and economic justice – such as that speech at Riverside about Vietnam – that's what got him killed.

There's a scene towards the end of the movie *Selma* when King is in jail speaking with Ralph Abernathy and he says: *"I'm tired, Ralphy. Tired of this."*

Abernathy replies: *"Eyes on the prize, Martin."*

King says: *"Yeah, but what is the prize?... We fight to have a seat at whatever table we want. [But] how does it help a black man to be able to eat at a lunch counter if he doesn't earn enough to buy the burger? Or worse yet, can't even read the menu, because there was no [negro] school where he's from. What is that? Is that equality?"*<sup>8</sup>

King knew that having an equal right to sit at the Table would not change lives if there was not equity in education (learning how to read) or economics (making a livable wage).

King knew what Jesus knew – but do we? The struggle has gone on too long. Will we accept what Jesus is serving up to us as Gospel Truth in this text?

There was nothing new about the Temple marketplace – all the buying and selling and ripping people off. It had been going on for generations; everyone just came to normalize it as acceptable Temple practice or they ignored the injustice that was inherent in it because they either profited from it themselves or they themselves weren't directly harmed by it. They could walk by the tables – out of convenience or comfort, but Jesus will not let us ignore our convictions. He gives us a model for drawing attention to things here and now. Today, not tomorrow. In public, not in private.

Flipping tables may not be your thing. Getting angry may not be your go-to emotion. But what do you do, in your day-to-day life, to name the injustices you see? When in your day are you publicly saying, *"This is not right."* You do not have to have all the answers about what is not

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<sup>8</sup> Dialogue of quote from *Selma* accessed on 16 January 2022 at <https://www.moviequotesandmore.com/selma-movie-quotes/>.



right about it, or how to go about fixing it. That can come in time, as we gather together collectively and share wisdom an experience, particularly listening to those who have been harmed by whatever the injustice is. But we begin by having the moral courage to speak truth and to trust that the fact that something is not right is enough for us to say something. Without having to have all the answers of how to fix it. Start by saying something. The more people start saying something – the more we’ll be able to collectively begin to do something.

Jesus could not be silent about what he saw.

What “money changing tables” have we normalized in our day? What injustices do we pass by on a regular basis either ignoring them because it’s more convenient or even participating in them because it contributes to our comfort, whether we like to admit it or not?

When it comes to prioritizing people, Jesus talked the most about money because it is economics, as King noted, that truly keeps us from living into an equal society. So if you are looking at where to start...start

with money...and our economic systems. What is the currency of our country? And what is it buying us? Not what is it buying you, personally, but us, collectively? In a country as wealthy as ours, people should not have to picket for a living wage. It seems to me that Jesus would want us to be asking, “*what can I sacrifice so that others can live well?*”

Truthfully, the answer to that question won’t even cost most of us anything close to a true sacrifice. There are countless ways to look at the economics of our households and examine where we might be the one sitting at the money changing table instead of the one turning it over. When we have those moments – it’s normal to feel bad or upset about it – but our *feelings* about it aren’t the point. The real question isn’t how do we *feel* about it, but what does our *faith* require us to do about it?

It’s all right here in today’s passage. If we follow Christ, then our faith gives us both the call and the courage to change. Jesus serves up what we need most – the gumption to put God over greed, the common good over capital gain.

We need not fear turning over or breaking down the systems that do not prioritize and uplift and sustain and give life to ALL people. Jesus reminds us that death comes before resurrection. Destroying sin is the first step. Raising us all up to new life is the transformative and lasting step that will lead us all into the future with hope.

When Jesus rose from the dead, John's gospel says in verse 22, the disciples remembered this scene at the Temple, and they remembered what Jesus had said. God has given us the power to defeat death – and yes, dying systems too – with resurrection. To not fear the destruction of things or systems, but to put our faith first in the people who are God's beloveds, especially, God's beloved son – Jesus...Jesus, who serves up a Daring Truth we too, must serve up in our lives:

“Justice is what love looks like in public.”

It's time to take our love out into the world. I don't know about you, but I have a lot of work to do. Thanks be to God we have the courage of Christ to help us do it.

Amen.