

***“Yes, we have good intentions,
and we must ask: are they God's intentions?”***

Seventh sermon in nine-week “Yes, And...” series: Passion + Humility
Yes, you feel what you feel...and you can practice humility.

John 2:13-22 (NRSV)

In the second chapter of John, we see two distinctive sides of Jesus. If you like emoji’s think: ☺ and ☹. Or “thumbs up” / “thumbs down.”

In the first half of the chapter Jesus is in Cana of Galilee turning water into wine so that a wedding reception can continue with joy and merriment. It is a sign of abundance. Then John tells us he takes a few days off, laying low with his mom and his brothers and disciples in Capernaum (John 2:12).

And so it follows that in John’s account, we can assume Jesus is well rested when he heads to Jerusalem for Passover and walks into the temple. That means the passionate anger we see here in today’s text is probably not because he is tired and overworked, but because he is absolutely 100% NOT OKAY with what he sees. The temple is a marketplace. This

text is about systemic injustice...not a personal temper tantrum of Jesus. It would be easier to deal with if it was the latter!

First, some context. This story is in all four gospels. In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) this event takes place in the last week of Jesus’ life and is the final public act whereby the authorities make the decision to arrest and kill Jesus.¹ For John, showing who Jesus is from the very beginning is very important. And for him, this temple incident is paramount to *who* Jesus is and *what* he is about. Jesus is here to represent the presence of God in his very person. And – just as Jesus is here to ensure abundance and celebration as we saw with the wedding at Cana – Jesus is here to turn over and abolish every system that oppresses or harms any person.

¹ Karoline Lewis, “Commentary on John 2:13-22,” *Working Preacher* (March 8, 2015), accessed on Feb. 17, 2019 at

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2377.

So knowing that this is what John is trying to show us in placing this incident as one of the *first* in Jesus' ministry, let's dive into the details.

Jesus enters the temple and he finds what you'd 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 – at least to everyone strolling around and participating in this normalized system. Yet with each action he does, we start to see this scene as Jesus sees it. Jesus' command to the dove sellers differs strikingly from the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48). Instead of a concern for temple malpractices (“den of robbers”), Jesus orders that his Father's house not be made a marketplace. You see, Jesus is not quibbling about mal-intent or mismanagement, but rather he calls for a complete dismantling of the entire system.²

To call this a “cleansing of the Temple” (as many people do) is quite benign. What Jesus saw was more malignant...a system

that had grown to take over the entire Temple and really make it sick.

According to John, Jesus found two things that enraged him: those who were “selling” and those who were “changing.”

The sellers (*tous pōlountas*) were those who sold animals for the offerings made at the temple. People were required to make sacrifices for a variety of festivals and rites. If you were wealthy you gave a large animal, like a cow or ox. If you were poor you gave doves or pigeons. However, to ensure “unblemished” animals, you were required to purchase your animals at the gate of the temple where the prices were higher than the country-side. And, as with any such system, the costs tended to be felt more by the poor than the wealthy. To purchase one pair of doves at the temple was the equivalent of two days' wages. But the doves had to be inspected for quality control just *inside* the temple, and if your recently purchased unblemished animals were found to be in fact blemished, then you had to buy two more doves for the equivalent of 40 days' wages!³ It was insane!

² Lewis, *ibid*.

³ Stan Duncan, “Jesus and the International Currency Traders in the Temple,” *The Jubilee Justice Blog*

(March 8, 2015), accessed on Feb. 17, 2019 at <http://jubileejusticeeconomics.blogspot.com/2015/03/jesus-and-international-exchange.html>.

The *changers* (*kermatistēs*) were needed because neither the animal offerings nor the temple tax could be paid with the Roman currency in use for most of the national commerce, because it had pictures (read “graven images”) of the Roman Emperor on them who claimed to be a god. So, the money had to be changed into usable local currency.⁴

The money changers sat outside of the temple proper, in the “court of the gentiles.” They bought and sold money as a part of the functioning of the general economy. And this was for purposes beyond just the temple. Jerusalem, in fact, required a money changing industry because it was an international city that dealt in a number of currencies and people had to have a system by which they could buy and sell them. Indeed, because there was no one else to perform the function, the money changers were like the banks of first century Palestine.⁵

However, the money changers – wait for it – were *also* corrupt. They would not only exaggerate the fees they had to charge for the transactions, they

would also inflate the exchange rate. The result was that for a poor person, the money changer’s share of the temple tax was about one day’s wages and his share of the transaction from international to local currency was about a half-day’s wages.⁶

All tolled, a one day stay in Jerusalem during one of the three major festivals could cost between \$3,000 and \$4,000 dollars in today’s numbers, and Jews were required to attend at least one of them each year. The Jewish historian Josephus estimated that up to 2.25 million people visited Jerusalem during Passover, which would generate the equivalent of hundreds of millions of dollars. While all of this may appear immoral, none of it was illegal at the time. They were business men operating within the law. But it took Jesus to point out that the law itself was unjust.⁷

In other words, as people of faith (even today), our primary question must always be...not is something legal or illegal, but is this law just or unjust to begin with? We can become obsessed with legality, when God really wants us to be

⁴ Duncan, *ibid.*
⁵ Duncan, *ibid.*

⁶ Duncan, *ibid.*
⁷ Duncan, *ibid.*

obsessed with humanity. This is why Jesus responds the way he does. Nothing about the temple system was hospitable or compassionate. It was self-serving and self-preserving.

So, what does Jesus do? He makes a whip, drives out the money changers, pours out their coins, turns over their tables and demands that they “*Stop making the realm of God into a realm of commerce.*” It’s interesting to note that he doesn’t say “*stop abusing a good system,*” but simply “*stop the system.*”⁸

The authorities essentially ask for some sort of proof that Jesus has the right to do what he just did and say what he just said. And Jesus’ response to the request of the Jewish authorities is typically enigmatic. He makes a dramatic pronouncement that the temple, which was the national center of worship, trade, and finance, would be destroyed. Now they interpret Jesus’ declaration literally, that the temple of which Jesus speaks is the one Jewish temple in which they are standing. Of course we know, however, that the temple to which Jesus refers is not the

temple in Jerusalem but the temple of his body.⁹

No longer do you go to the Temple to find God; Jesus *himself* is the presence of God. This is controversial of course which is why Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have this act leading to Jesus’ arrest.

Of course, remember – and this is key – it is most likely that by the time John wrote this gospel, Herod’s Temple was also now gone, destroyed in the sack of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Some commentators think that one of the reasons John makes the “temple” such a major theme in his Gospel—moving up the cleansing of the temple to the start of Jesus’ ministry instead of near the end when it most likely occurred—was to reassure his readers that there WAS and IS still a true Temple: it is *Jesus*.¹⁰

Because the temple symbolizes the location and presence of God, Jesus is essentially saying to the Jewish leaders that he *is* the presence of God. Where one looks for God, expects to find God, imagines God to be are all at stake for the Gospel of John.¹¹

⁸ Duncan, *ibid.*

⁹ Lewis, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Scott Hoezee, “John 2:13-22,” *Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Seminary* (Feb. 26, 2018),

accessed on Feb. 17, 2019 at

https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/lent-3b-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel.

¹¹ Lewis, *ibid.*

Honestly, Jesus was enraged that there was a sacrificial system set up that implied that in order to be in God's presence you had to pay so much money – keeping the poor poor and helping the rich get richer off of the poor – when the reality was to be in God's presence didn't have to cost a dime. (Or a denarii.)

Jesus was standing right in front of them as the presence of God. No one has to buy their way into some special place to see and be with God. God is in the person of Jesus. God is accessible to all...no strings attached, financial or otherwise. As John wrote in chapter 1, Jesus is the "*Word made flesh to dwell (not in the temple but) among ALL the people,*" (John 1:14).

Now I like to give people the benefit of the doubt about things and so maybe we can charitably assume that originally, this temple system was set up when such sacrifices were thought to be needed, and it was probably much less sophisticated and egalitarian. Those who ran the temple probably began this enterprise with good intentions – thinking it was necessary for proper worship of God in the temple.

¹¹ Duncan, *ibid.*

But then someone figured out they could charge a little more and make a little more money...especially around Passover. To use a modern example, all the sudden what was the equivalent of one t-shirt stand outside the stadium turned into hundreds of t-shirt and concession stands – not just around the stadium and in the stadium, but peppering surrounding streets as well.

Probably enraging Jesus even more is the fact that at Passover, they were to be remembering the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery. God liberated them from slavery, and now their task was to do the same for others. This was the basis for the Sabbath and Jubilee legislation: God freed us, so we must now free others.¹²

So Jesus enters Jerusalem expecting (or at least wanting) to see a celebration of the Exodus liberation acts of God and he sees instead a corrupted system that maintains an economic caste system. The irony was obvious and upsetting."¹³

How could an event that was to be celebrating liberation turn into something that was

¹² Duncan, *ibid.*

ensnaring people in poverty...helping some have power over others...and insisting that to be present with God one had to be subservient to the economic systems of the temple?

Well, again...what began perhaps as good intentions, and maybe even what continued as good intentions – after all, maybe there were some folks who innocently thought this was just the way it always has been and therefore was the way that it needed to be – had turned into something that Jesus didn't even recognize as having anything to do with God. He knows what he sees is wrong. He knows what he sees is not God's intention for the people.

So much energy was being put into the temple marketplace system. Imagine what all that energy could have done if those people and animals and resources had been used to help feed the hungry and clothe the naked, provide water for the thirsty and healing for the sick?

How did something with good intentions at first stray so far from God's intentions? If Jesus hadn't walked in the temple that day, how much longer would this system have continued? Who else would

have seen it for what it was? Why was everyone just accepting it as the norm?

As passionate as Jesus is in this text, it begs an important and humbling question for all of us: are there places where we are putting our energy and time and resources that really have little to do with how God is at work in the world?

Think about this text. About Jesus' anger and frustration at seeing a system that not only carried out economic injustice but that also put conditions on who could be worthy enough to be in God's presence. It may seem extreme, but it's not! We are surrounded by such systems. We've just become blind to them or we've normalized them.

Like teachers striking for just wages in Denver this week, Jesus has to overturn tables and make a huge scene for people to look at what they were doing and see it for the corruption that it was. Some were overtly corrupt...others were probably just on autopilot – which is even scarier. And those being taken advantage of just thought *“it is what it is.”*

Well, Jesus says *“NO”* to *“it is what it is.”* This is one of those

times where Jesus' passion is a hard stop NO. It's not "Yes, And..." here, right? It's not "Yes, continue selling animals in the temple for sacrifice, and make sure you have scholarships for those who can't afford it." It's "No. Stop selling things. You don't need them to worship God. You don't need them to get to God. Look at me. I'm right here. Before you. Stop using people and start seeing them. Stop ripping people off and start serving them instead."

Where do we need to humbly examine how our systems and traditions have gotten so far away from God that Jesus wouldn't recognize them as the work of God at all?

Payday lending with sky high interest rates that prey on the poor? Unjust mass incarceration for people of color? Walls and checkpoints that separate us from one another? Luxury housing units being built at light rate speed – while hundreds and hundreds of people have no affordable housing?

I think all of these things when they started have a good intention at their core right? People need loans. Prisons serve a purpose. Border

security is important. Housing is a necessity. But when these core principles become corrupted with power, greed, racism, fear, or preservation of privilege...well, then we get things like payday lending, mass incarceration, billion dollar walls, and multi-million dollar homes.

You see, almost anything can start with a good intention and a real need. And then things get carried away – for all kinds of reasons, often self-serving ones. And it usually happens slowly too...it's a slippery slope; it's hard to see when you're in it, so you have to pull yourself out and get a bird's eye view sometimes.

So – bird's eye view: **If Jesus was walking around today – what tables would he be turning?** We must humbly ask ourselves are we ourselves sitting at those tables – profiting from these tables – or maybe even just ignorantly or apathetically walking by these tables?

I have to think that after this incident in the Temple the disciples looked at one another and said – "Wow. He's no joke. Don't mess around with him. I don't want to get on his bad side!" Right? I mean...Jesus

means business in this text. And we have to really think about what it means for us today. He didn't turn over those tables just to have a good story to tell years later. It must mean something for us today.

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, CS Lewis reminds us that the divine-human struggle is neither tidy nor tame, but it is nonetheless one that we can live with confidence.

Susan and Lucy ask Mr. and Mrs. Beaver to describe Aslan (Lewis's representation of Jesus). They ask if Aslan is a man.

Mr. Beaver replies: *"Aslan a man? Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-beyond-the Sea...Aslan is a lion — the Lion, the great Lion."*

"Ooh!" said Susan. *"I'd thought he was a man. Is he — quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."*

"That you will, dearie, and make no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, *"if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan*

without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. *"Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver is telling you? Who said anything about being safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."*¹⁴

The turning over of the tables in the temple is a stark warning against every false sense of security, against every nice-and-neat box we try to stick Jesus into for our own comfort. Jesus comes to challenge and to defamiliarize what “religion” makes safe and cozy. He never once says, “understand me.” He says something far more radical: “Follow me.”¹⁵

How do we tell the difference between good intentions and God’s intention? We look at Jesus. We look at how he lived, for that is how God wants us to live as well.

Jesus’ life is full of passion and humility both. He is passionate about people – over and above systems and the powers that be

¹⁴ From chapter 8 of C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

¹⁵ Dan Clendenin, “Feeling Nervous About Meeting Jesus,” *Journey with Jesus* (March 8, 2015), accessed

on Feb. 17, 2019 at <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20150302JJ.shtml>.

– and he is humble enough to suffer for the sake of loving people and overthrowing power. What are we doing in our life that lifts up other people? That preserves their dignity and not just our desires?

Perhaps that's a question to start with when we're thinking about God's intentions for our lives. Because when we think of what God wants us to do in our lives, if you're like me, you naturally think in terms of what you want to do for your life first. And we justify our wants with God's blessing. I certainly do this. I like to think about what Anne wants for Anne's plan before I pray to God about what God wants for Anne. I think we all do this. We think God is on "our" side and that the Bible means what it says to match our desires, our beliefs, etc. We so desperately want our faith and belief system and our God to validate our life and our values and our ways of living.

For example, when our loved one is healed we say "*God answered our prayer*" and when our loved one remains sick we say "*where is God?*"

You see, our human intentions will ALWAYS seek human understanding. God is beyond our understanding. We pray for

God to reveal to us what we should do or what path to take...but I wonder if we need to switch our thinking (myself included) and ask ourselves...

Not what *we* think God would want us to do (hypothetically)... but what we know Jesus did do (for real).

That's the best way to ensure that our good intentions are also God's intentions. To look at what Jesus did...and to do likewise.

Amen.