

“Smackdown”
John 2:13-25; Micah 6:6-8

Even though our children are now grown and out on their own, we still give Christmas gifts in the same manner we did when they were growing up — Jesus got three presents so you get three presents. That Christmas gift list now includes my son’s fiancé, so when we were in Rome this past summer, we spotted something we thought she would like and bought it. In Europe they have a VAT, or Value Added Tax, on purchased items. But as a foreigner, you can file to receive a portion of the tax back. You have to spend over \$150 in the same store, then the store fills out the form with your passport number.

Now, there are three different companies that administer the program in Italy. One works through American Express. We also bought my son a Christmas present, so I took my form and passport to the American Express office near the Spanish Steps and they immediately gave me my refund in euros, the currency of the European Union. But for the other present, we had to deal with another company that has an office by the Pantheon. And unlike American Express, if you want to get your refund there in the city, they force you to take it in American dollars. Which doesn’t sound like a bad deal, until you realize that means you must get your dollars at the rate of exchange they set. Which is significantly lower than bank rates and gives you much less money in return. Otherwise, they have set up a currency exchange system to take advantage of you.

Now, in our scripture, Jesus has come to the Temple in Jerusalem, where currency exchange is a big business. During Passover, up to one million people flooded into Jerusalem. Jews from all over the world arrived to celebrate the most holy of Jewish holidays, the commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt. And, of course, they wanted to experience the moment of a lifetime, to present a sacrifice at the Temple. Naturally, hailing from every corner of the world, they did not bring along their own sheep, or cow, or dove for the sacrifice. They would buy them there in Jerusalem, which had created a thriving animal trade in the Temple’s Court of Gentiles, the outer Temple precinct where everyone was welcome.

Along with the animal sellers were the Temple tax collectors. And Jewish law prohibited paying the tax in foreign money because foreign money carried the engravings of Roman emperors, who were considered gods. The commandments forbade both graven images and declaring anyone or anything god but the God of Israel. So, foreign money had to be

exchanged into Jewish money to pay the required tax, and of course, the tax collectors took a cut of that exchange.

Into this Temple Passover milieu steps Jesus. Making a whip, possibly from rushes on which the animals laid, he begins to drive out the sellers and their animals. He overturns the money changers' tables and pours out their coins. You can visualize the pandemonium as this madman goes wild amidst this holiday crowd yelling, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

Likely when it is done, Jesus is standing with his whip, breathing hard, perspiration pouring off him, when someone in the crowd asks, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" And Jesus replies, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up."

Then someone else, obviously an engineer or math major, says, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?" But writing in retrospect, John, the gospel's author, relates that the disciples later understood Jesus' comment referred to his death and resurrection, which caused them to believe the words Jesus had spoken.

John then concludes the story by noting that many people believed in Jesus because of the signs, or miracles, he performed. But Jesus did not entrust himself to them because he knew a belief in signs could not sustain their faith.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen."

The gospel writer John tells this story, as well as all the others in his book, so that hearing them will lead us to trust Christ for the parts of our existence that have yet to be seen or written.

The cleansing of the Temple is found in all four gospel accounts. Yet, there are some major discrepancies between the story found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, often referred to as the Synoptic Gospels, because their stories are similar, versus the one we read in our passage from John. For instance, in the Synoptic gospels the cleansing of the Temple comes at the end of Jesus' ministry. In fact, it is the impetus for the arrest that leads to his death. But here, John places it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In the Synoptics, Jesus declares the buying and selling has made the Temple a "den of thieves," giving the general impression that the animal sellers and tax collectors were taking advantage of the people. But here in John, Jesus' anger seems to be directed at the sacrificial system itself, not its abuse.

Now, similarity of wording leads us to believe that John at least had access to Mark's gospel, or parts of it. So, could the discrepancy between the two be attributed to John's memory failing him? Or, did he disagree with the other writer's dating? We really don't know.

But knowledge of these discrepancies is important in understanding and interpreting scripture. If you believe every word of the Bible is literally true and dictated by God, then you must wrestle with why the accounts are different. Because I don't think God's memory failed.

We believe the scriptures were inspired by God, but written by human beings, fallible human beings whose memories sometimes failed them. We also know that our view of history as factual was not always the concern of the ancient world. For instance, the gospel writer John was far more interested in theology than history, often using events to make a theological point. From this perspective, minor differences of detail do not dissuade us from the truth contained in the scripture, but rather confirm that at their heart all the gospel authors are telling us the same thing, that Jesus is the Christ.

A newly married man asked his wife, "Would you have married me if my father hadn't left me a fortune?"

"Honey," the woman replied sweetly, "I'd have married you no matter who left you a fortune."

The gospel writer John makes the same point as the other three gospels, just in a different way.

So, what is the gospel writer John trying to tell us by describing this incident? As I said, John is far more interested in theological points than historical accuracy. His view of the Jerusalem Temple cleansing is not that people are abusing Temple worship, but that with Jesus, Temple worship would no longer be necessary.

Now, remember, unlike Mark, by the time John wrote this gospel the Temple had been destroyed. In 70 A.D. the Romans looted and burned the Temple, an event still famously depicted on a frieze on the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum. So, John is looking back and interpreting that day in light of what had already occurred. Jesus was raised on the third day, and the Temple had been destroyed.

Consequently for Christians, the Jewish belief that the Temple was the house of God, God's place of residence among his people, had been transferred to Jesus. John wants his readers to connect the Temple with Jesus. Whereas God at one time used the Temple as his residence among humanity, now Jesus is the new Temple, the locus of faith, God with us. Jesus, therefore, becomes the focus of worship. Rather than the sacrifice of

animals at the Temple bringing people God's forgiveness, putting them in touch with God, now that forgiveness, that touch of God, that line to God is found in Jesus. This story is not about the Temple it is about Jesus and his connection to you and me.

One day a woman's housework-challenged husband decided to wash his sweatshirt. Seconds after he stepped into the laundry room, he shouted to her, "What setting do I use on the washing machine?"

"It depends," she replied, "What does it say on your shirt?"

He replied back, "University of Michigan."

On its front, this story can look like it is about Jesus getting angry. But what the material really relates is its declaration of Jesus as our pathway to spiritual cleansing and to God.

John concludes his narration of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple with verses which are very interesting, especially in light of how he has constructed his gospel. The last three verses declare that while Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover many people believed in him because they witnessed the signs he performed. But John tells us Jesus did not entrust himself to them because he understood people, what was in their hearts, and knew that a faith based on signs would not last.

Now, this is an interesting statement from a man whose gospel is sometimes referred to as the "book of signs." Signs, such as miracles, are very important in John's gospel. John employs these signs as a way to prove, to show, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, God's Son. Yet, in this passage, he admits that Jesus did not entrust himself to those who were drawn by the miracles because that is not enough to sustain faith.

In religion, there is always the temptation to be drawn by "the show." Historically, the show has included the bones of saints or miraculous sightings of the Virgin Mary, or sacred icons, or even men or women with god-like healing powers. Today, in addition to these we could add inspiring, or funky, music or a big gym, or a beautiful sanctuary, or even a preacher who wears silk shirts or tells good stories.

The signs, the miracles, the show can take various forms. Many people in Jerusalem in 28 A.D. would have been enthralled with water being turned into wine, or a blind man recovering his sight, or seeing Temple money changers and animal sellers trying to escape a madman with a homemade whip. But did they come looking for a show or a way of life?

Our faith is not found in signs, but a person, a person whom we believe is the very Son of God. And it is exemplified, proven, by imitating the life this man taught us. Enjoying the show doesn't equate to faith.

Saying “I love Jesus” doesn’t equate to being in church on Sunday. Saying “I’m grateful” doesn’t equate to giving ten percent of my income. John is reminding us that Jesus cannot be fooled. He knows us. He knows you. We all like signs, but do we love Jesus?

In their book Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life, Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat recount the experience of author and Presbyterian minister Frederick Beuchner who, in his autobiographical book, Telling Secrets,” breaks silence about a family secret: how his teenage daughter struggled with anorexia. There came a day when he, himself, was in the pits of despair, worried sick that his daughter would never get well again. But then, on a dark night, came a message of hope, from an unusual quarter.

Beuchner writes:

I remember sitting parked by the roadside once, terribly depressed and afraid about my daughter’s illness and what was going on in our family, when out of nowhere a car came along down the highway with a license plate that bore on it the one word out of all the words in the dictionary I needed most to see exactly then. The word was TRUST. What do you call a moment like that? Something to laugh off as the kind of joke life plays on us every once in a while? The word of God? I am willing to believe that maybe it was something of both, but for me it was an epiphany. The owner of the car turned out to be, as I suspected, a trust officer in a trust, and not long ago, having read an account I wrote of the incident somewhere, he found out where I lived and one afternoon brought me the license plate itself, which sits propped up on a bookshelf in my house to this day. It is rusty around the edges and a little battered, and it is also as holy a relic as I have ever seen.

For faith to develop and prosper, signs must become pathways to belief and trust.

“Smackdown”

Jesus put a smackdown on money changers and animal sellers that day in the Temple. We don’t know exactly what prompted his action, whether it was the high prices or dishonesty of the traders or the whole system of animal sacrifice. What we do know is that Jesus’ action was not really about the fate of the Temple, it was about his fate. This demonstration pointed to the future, a future that would

find Jesus at its center. The cleansing of the Temple, the signs, the miracles were not important separate from the person who gave them meaning, Jesus.

This morning, as we search our hearts and minds asking what is the locus for our faith, let each of us question our own motives and actions. For me, is it about the outer trappings, the signs, the show? Or, at the heart of my heart, in the center of my goals and priorities, that which drives and motivates me, will I find Jesus?

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