

John 2:13-22 “The Temptation to Be Nice”

What a troublesome little passage we have here this morning. “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild” loses it in the outer court of the Jewish Temple. The Temple! The very center of worship for Law observing faith abiding Jews dating back to the reign of King Solomon *ten centuries* before Jesus was even born! Jesus makes his own whip, drives humans and animals alike out of the temple, turns over tables, scatters coins all over the place and goes on a rant about making his Father’s house a marketplace. But wait ... that’s not the only troublesome thing about this passage. One of the things that drives Bible scholars crazy is that in John’s gospel, this all takes place near the *beginning* of Jesus’ ministry. Matthew, Mark, and Luke say this event happened during the *last week* of his ministry before he was crucified. Strict biblical inerrantists will say, “Well then obviously Jesus cleansed the temple twice - Matthew, Mark, and Luke just didn’t mention the first time and John didn’t mention the last time.” That is a ridiculously big stretch so pardon me if I dismiss that theory. What’s important is that *all four* gospel writers thought this was an essential event in Jesus’ life and ministry. And this is a small miracle in and of itself! Aside from his baptism, some key teachings and sayings, and the last seven days of his life, it is rare for all four gospels to include an event like this. So let’s just not worry about the “when” of this event and let’s concentrate more on the “why.”

Why did Jesus make a big scene in the Jerusalem temple? Well, because he didn’t like what he saw. There were merchants there selling animals for sacrifice. Here’s the problem though -- it’s not like selling animals was something new. This was a big revelation for me when I was reading commentaries on this passage. Listen, I’ve even preached sermons about how terrible it was that these horrible, greedy merchants set up animal cages and currency exchange kiosks in the temple and made it into a cheap strip mall. But again -- this wasn’t something new. It was an important component in the way the temple was maintained. Think about it! Where were people who *weren’t* in the farming or ranching business supposed to get animals for sacrifice? They *had* to

buy animals if they were going to follow the prescribed religious ritual! So here's Jesus flying off the handle about something that made it possible for people to practice their religion. So there must have been something else going on here. And we're in luck this week, because John's gospel does the best job of explaining the details even if his timeline doesn't line up with the other gospel writers.

Remember, the gospels weren't the first books written in our New Testament. Paul's letters to the early churches ... the epistles ... were written first. The epistles were written somewhere between 50 – 57 in the Common Era. Matthew, Mark, and Luke came along somewhere between the early 70s and early 90s. John's gospel was the latest written somewhere around 90–110. This is significant because something really tragic happened in the year 70 which is *between* the time the epistles and gospels were written. What happened is that Rome got tired of all these Jewish factions rising up against the empire so they decided to lay siege to Jerusalem and destroy the temple. So it's no surprise that the gospel writers wanted to emphasize Jesus' cleansing of the temple. See, after the temple was destroyed, the Jews thought, "Oh my gosh, what are we going to do without the temple?! That's the center of our worship ... that's where we fulfill our sacrificial obligations ... that's where God *lives!*" But Jesus' message especially here in John's gospel is, "You don't *need* a temple to worship God. I am the temple." Oh! Okay, I get it. The early church, who was mostly made up of Jews, needed to hear this! That's probably why it's one of the events that all four gospel writers highlight. So this is definitely a source of comfort to those early Christians who were probably feeling pretty hopeless because their central place of worship had been destroyed. Today it might feel like if the Vatican was destroyed, or the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City, or our General Church offices in Indianapolis. It would be devastating. We'd need to be reminded that because of Jesus we don't need these buildings made of stone to be in relationship with God.

Okay, well thank you so much for the history lesson, Jesse. But you still haven't explained *why* Jesus got so angry over this! Why would

someone whose life and ministry seemed to be all about peace and non-violence threaten people and destroy property to make his point?

Has anyone ever told you that it's bad to be angry? Sometimes we hear this from parents, teachers, friends, employers or others who have influence in our lives. "Don't be so angry. Can't you be nice?" Have you ever heard anyone say, "It's better to be nice than show anger?" Anger isn't the problem. The why, how and where about the way we *direct* our anger is the problem. I know people who fly off the handle at every little thing ... to the point where they do it so often that others just tune them out.

There were two faculty members where I went to seminary who were night and day as far as their temperaments go. Both have died since, so I can tell this story. Dr. Norris was the professor of theology, and he was born ready for a fight. If something came up that he didn't agree with, he'd stand up, yell, rant, rave, pace, interrupt people and generally derail a meeting agenda in no time flat. It got to the point where the other faculty members just quit listening to him even if he had a valid point to make! On the other side of the room was Rex Jones, who was the director of practical ministries. He rarely said anything at meetings. If he agreed with something, he'd vote yes. If he disagreed, he'd vote no. Now on the occasion that Rex actually spoke up about something, people around the table would perk up and listen. "Wow, if Rex has something to say about this, it must be important!" On *rare* occasions Rex would actually get angry. When this happened, everyone turned their attention to him because if this was something that upset Rex to the point of anger, it must be a seriously important matter of justice. And typically, the room came to a consensus that if Rex believed in something that strongly, he must have spent a lot of time thinking this through! He must have taken the time to actually pray about this issue in order to come to his conclusion. In these cases, the way Rex voted was almost *always* how the rest of the room voted. Even Dr. Norris.

Think about times throughout our history where anger, especially as it relates to injustice, has inspired great change and reform. Women's suffrage, Temperance, the Civil Rights movement, Apartheid, the Stonewall movement, Black Lives Matter, #metoo, several anti-war movements, the Moral Majority, Disability rights, Farm workers, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Just Say No, the Tea Party, the Occupy movement, Moral Mondays ... too many to name. Some of these movements were started by "mild-mannered" people whose anger over injustice motivated them to fight for change. Had the leaders of these movements given in to the temptation to be nice, who knows what would have happened? Their anger at whatever injustice they saw is what motivated them to act. We've heard the term, "righteous anger" before, but I'm not sure what to think about that label. Because again, there are people who think that their angry response to every little thing that bothers them is "righteous." I like Paul's admonition in Ephesians 4:26 -- "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil."

Jesus' anger in the temple court wasn't necessarily directed *at* the money-changers. It was directed more towards the broken system that caused people to believe they had to rely on a human-made structure that required merchants and money-changers in order to feel connected to God. The temple was a tool. It was just a place made out of stone. It wasn't a bad place. In fact it was a good place. It just wasn't a *necessary* place. At least it wasn't necessary in order for people to experience God's presence. Sometimes we get hung up on things ... buildings, paintings, statues, banners, stained glass ... whatever, and we forget that church isn't a place ... it's the people. That's what Jesus was trying to teach when he got so mad in the temple: You don't need ... this ... *place!* It's the people not the building that matters. We are God's *people*. Structures are temporary. Buildings come and go.

Graham and I went down to Livermore Friday to pick up a bunch of chairs from United Christian Church. We had to do this because United Christian Church could no longer afford to maintain their building.

What's interesting is that the building was originally a Jewish Synagogue. The Synagogue wasn't able to afford to maintain the building, so they sold it to United Christian Church. We have their chairs now because they have to take everything out of that building so they can bulldoze it. In the long run it's going to be more economical to sell the lot rather than spend the money it would take to fix the building. Can you imagine how the folks at United might be feeling now? Can you imagine how the folks from the Synagogue must have felt when they had to sell the building? Or what they might feel like now knowing this building they spent so much time and effort and resources to construct is going to be leveled? Some of them might even be angry over this. They might be ruminating over all sorts of "woulda-shoulda-coulda" scenarios. There might even be some angry finger pointing and blaming going on. I don't know. I hope not. That kind of anger seems like a waste of time and energy that's better spent on building *community*. That's the kind of building the church should be invested in. When you build community, you're not as likely to fixate on things that are made of wood or stone or metal. When you build community you're more likely to focus on people and what sort of injustices might be occurring in their lives that hinders or prevents them from being in relationship with God or the community of God's people. You might even feel angry about the powers and principalities at work that keep people from being in those relationships. That's okay though. Good things can come out of that sort of anger. Not so much when the anger is over things that will only tarnish, rust, crumble or whither.