

MEETING GOD

Making a whip of cords, Jesus [he] drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

John 2:15-16

Can you imagine this sort of scene at The Empty Mugs Brass & Organ Spectacular: broken pottery everywhere, ten and twenty dollar bills flying all over the place, fleeing horn players trying to get out of the building before Jesus caught up with them? Not quite the same thing, I know, but you get the picture: an irate Jesus showing up at an annual festival held in a sacred place. Maybe it would be more like Jesus showing up on Easter, overturning the Easter breakfast collection basket, and scattering eggs, bacon, and fruit cups everywhere, leaving the men who prepared the breakfast standing there wide-eyed and with their mouths agape in shock and surprise.

Since this story appears in all four Gospels we may tend to gloss over the details, particularly since it's one time when we get to witness Jesus thoroughly ticked off, his righteous anger translated into physical action. The account of Jesus cleansing the Temple is often held up as an example of Jesus' humanity – his humanness. If you had any doubts about whether faithful Christians are allowed to get angry, just turn to this story. If Jesus can get angry so can we. Plus, it's a wonderful example that Jesus was indeed fully human - truly one of us, or as Joan Osborne famously sang,

Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Tryin' to make his way home?

You've probably heard some form of the Jesus got angry sermon preached before. I've certainly preached it at least once. But is that really at the heart of what is going on here? Is that the main point John is trying to communicate to us – a justification for righteous anger – is that the point John wants to make by including this story in his gospel?

The account of Jesus cleansing the temple occurs in all four Gospels and while the versions in the synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are rather similar, John's version is markedly different. For starters, John gives us a more details specifying more animals and describing Jesus making a whip. More significantly, in John, the cleansing of the temple occurs near the beginning of Jesus' ministry (this is only chapter 2). In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the cleansing happens much later, almost right after Jesus' triumphal, palm-strewn entry into Jerusalem, and thus is associated with Jesus' Passion. Most scholars agree that the cleansing of the Temple likely only happened once, with all four gospels recording the same event. So, what is John up to?

One clue is found in what Jesus says. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke his complaint: "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers." In John's account,

however, Jesus says, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the implication seems to be that folks are engaging in corrupt practices. In John, it’s a more systemic issue. As scholar Gail R. O’Day notes:

It is important to place the scene in the Temple in its proper religious and historical context. Cattle, sheep, and doves were required for burnt offerings in the Temple. Since Passover was a pilgrimage feast, many of those coming to worship in the Temple would have journeyed a great distance and would not have brought animals with them. They needed to buy animals in Jerusalem in order to participate in temple worship. Similarly, the temple tax could not be paid in Greek or Roman coinage because of the human image (the emperor’s head) on these coins, and foreign coinage had to be changed into the legal currency in Jerusalem. Therefore, the sale of animals and the changing of money were necessary if the worship of the cult was to proceed.

In John’s take on things, Jesus is not lashing out at a corrupt practice, but challenging the entire religious institution, including how worship functions. Jesus confronts the system itself, not just its abuses. We are experiencing echoes of this religious upheaval as COVID has forced to rethink how we do church. Not just how do we get the audio and video to work, but the more fundamental question of what it means to be the church. As we transition to a “new normal” this question isn’t going to fade away. On the contrary, it will become even more pronounced.

As the story of Jesus’ cleansing of the temple continues, we have this weird exchange between Jesus and the Jews – that is the religious leaders of the faith of which Jesus was a part.

The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

In John, when Jesus has exchanges with folks there usually ends being a good deal of miscommunication and folks talking past each other. Think of Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, Mary lamenting Lazarus. Here at the Temple, things are no different. Religious leaders assume Jesus is talking about the Temple as a physical building, the place where folks come for worship - to encounter God. But Jesus is talking about his body. Which - by analogy means, we meet God through Jesus.

I think it is easier at times to accept the notion that Jesus was fully human than to proclaim he was also fully divine. It’s hard to make sense of one person who could be both and we are always at risk for falling off to one side or the other. Either Jesus is not really human, and just God in disguise, sort of like the Greek God Zeus masquerading as human, or Jesus is not really God: he’s just an exceptional human, a prophet, a precursor of Gandhi, or Mother Teresa, or Martin Luther King, Jr. As much as we may want to focus on Jesus’ anger in this scene and be comforted by his humanness - his being like us, John is pointing us elsewhere to Jesus’s divinity. If you want to know God, to encounter God, to meet God, look to Jesus.

After all, this is the gospel that begins, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God.” According to John, Jesus is the embodiment of God’s Word, whose dwelling with humanity enables them to see God’s glory and who continues to show them the way to God. For John, when people focus too much on a physical location, they miss out on God’s glory standing right in front of them. Mary Hinkle Shore, Pastor and Dean of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary notes:

The temple was a holy place. It was a place where human life and divine blessing met. In John’s Gospel, the body of Jesus is the new “holy place.” “The Word became flesh, and lived among us,” John writes. In the incarnation, with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, God’s dwelling place is with human beings, as a human being... The surprise in today’s gospel reading is that Jesus says that the transcendent is present in his body. The gospel of John makes this claim, that a human body — unique but also a lot like your body or mine — is the holy place of God. Jesus was not just “wearing” a human body like a set of clothes. He *was* a human body, as inseparable from his body as you are from yours. And God was inseparable from him.

The question Mary invites us to ponder, is “Where does God meet you?”

Is the meeting place a church sanctuary filled with light? Or maybe it is a cathedral that looks completely dark until your eyes adjust to the dimness. Do you see God in a candle flame? Do you know the transcendent through a piece of music? Maybe you recognize God in the water, bread and wine of the Sacraments? Maybe your holy place a hike or a vista that puts you in the presence of God. Maybe it is silence.

Take a moment to think about the question, “Where does God meet you?” and, if you’re comfortable, add it into the chat on Facebook.

COVID has forced us to alter our understanding of where we go to meet God and that’s not a bad thing. Yes, I know it may be a bit scary to think about what happens next, how we will transition into the new normal, what church will be like going forward. It keeps me up at night. But then I remember who traveling companions are on this journey, all of you, whether in person or remote. The building is ready, it will be here, but as we’ve discovered you don’t need the building to truly and fully meet God. In fact, God is already here, standing right in front of you.

AMEN.