

Our Faith Deconstructed

John 2: 13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, 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!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 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. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

The first week of Lent, we were in the wilderness. The second we heard Jesus tell us to "pick up the cross." Today, we find ourselves in the temple. Imagine: it's Passover. The atmosphere is festive. The memory of Israel's journey out of Egypt hangs in the balance. Small businesses have set up their tents and stands, as the week's profits will feed their families for months to come. Money changers are available in the corner to purchase livestock for sacrifice. It's a well-oiled machine. Then, out of nowhere, we hear someone yelling and creating a ruckus. This person starts tossing tables and damaging personal property. Then he begins releasing caged animals and cracking a whip like he's Indiana Jones. Apparently the dude is quite upset. Full of zeal and angry grief over what is happening in the temple. What do we do with it?

Start by asking: what makes Jesus so angry? What makes Jesus upset enough to riot? Yesterday, about 25 of us went on a pilgrimage on the margins. We followed our guides who led us through a day in the life of an unhoused person. All of us spend the day trying to navigate the buses or the internet at the library; all of the scenarios we followed led to dead ends and failures. Some seeking to find a shelter or housing ran into hiccups. What do you do when you have no credit, or an ID, or spend your last \$6 on a nice shirt for an interview only to find out that the job has been filled once you got there? We learned in our group that if you were seeking outpatient care for an addiction, and wanted to get sober, not only were resources scarce if you didn't have insurance, but some, like our group leader, have been told that if they want a bed, they will have to keep using. Our guide said, "If I keep using, I'll die." To which they responded, "If you want to get in to survive, you will have to keep using until there's a bed available." I mean, none of it makes any sense. After we listened to story after story of well-intended systems that didn't work within our larger systems which also didn't work, how did we all leave feeling? Did we not feel a grievous anger?

Now imagine walking into a space dedicated to God—like the temple. Where once a year, people would pilgrimage from all over to offer God a sacrifice for their wrongdoings. In order to make a sacrifice we would need an animal. There would be an assortment of animals in cages with ropes used as leashes. For the well-off they could purchase cattle or an unblemished sheep. If one was poor, they had options as well—from a dove to a pigeon. But in order to buy an animal you had to go through a temple moneychanger which had a fee for currency exchange. There was a temple tax added. In the name of supply and demand, some would be wheeling and dealing like on Facebook Marketplace. The temple is a well-oiled system. And the holy space can also create the same barriers and hiccups the marginalized experienced out in the rest of society—except in the name of God.

We were reminded yesterday that we often hear that the system is broken. But the truth is, it isn't broken. The system is simply doing what it has been designed to do: to protect those who have privilege, wealth, and resources at the expense of those who do not. And so the system doesn't need fixed, it needs to be broken so we can put it back together in a way that benefits everyone.

So we see Jesus disrupting the system saying, “Take these things out of here! Stop making God's house a marketplace!” In other words, this system is a sham! Does God really require a sacrifice to be forgiven? Does an unblemished sheep make God happier than a one-winged pigeon? Is God's love for only those who prove their worth?

You see, in John's gospel Jesus isn't about cleansing the temple, he's about desacralizing it. Because when we make the temple, or the ritual of sacrifice, or the system the main thing, we will more than likely miss what the main thing really is about. John's gospel wants us to know—early in the gospel—that as meaningful as the temple is, and as central as the temple is to Israel's identity, when the system's main purpose is to benefit some at the expense of others, the system needs to be disrupted. “Tear down this temple,” says Jesus, “and I will rise it up in three days.”

You see, I wonder if what makes Jesus so grievous is that when we build our faith on the bricks of doctrines or tradition, buildings or rituals or yes, even on sentences of scripture. When those things become the main thing, we end up in an idolatrous loop, trapping God in our own self-constructed building. And then the system we create becomes about protecting the system itself rather than making sure the system works for everyone.

So what if Jesus really is about shaking the foundations? “Tear down this system,” says Jesus, “and I will rebuild it in three days through a people.”

Dr. King once took a drive around his community. He saw the beggars on the street corners. He watched how dramatically different the neighborhoods looked on one side of town compared to the other. He saw a political system which controlled society's beliefs and violent actions against others in calculated ways. And then he saw churches. All those churches with their high steeples with crosses. He saw all those marquees quoting scripture. He listened to the church bells which ran on Sunday mornings calling people into Divine attendance. He watched as people flocked into the buildings wearing smiles and their Sunday best. As he took in the church he asked, “What do the people in those buildings care about? What do those people who sing hymns, and

say prayers, and put money in the collection plate each and every Sunday—what do they really care about? And who is the God that they worship?”

For those of us who went on the pilgrimage yesterday or walked for the nationwide Poor People’s Campaign march.

For those who serve at the food pantry, or those who are organizing for systemic change. For those who get out the vote.

For those who are serving lunch to our homeless friends at the Dwelling today.

For those who care for students and/or those struggling with mental health or addiction. For those who create healing spaces.

For all of us who, in our own little or collective way, come together to disrupt systems of injustice and exclusion, keep at it.

Please, keep at it.

For God’s Spirit doesn’t dwell in a system or a building, but in a people who are bold enough to rise up out of systems of hopelessness and help to rebuild something new. Again, and again, and again. Whether it takes three days, three years, or three eons. People who keep at it no matter how long it takes. Amen.