

God Saves by Showing Us the Way

That the Word Might be Saved 3

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John 2:13-22, Psalm 19: 1-10, 14

Introduction

Last week I mentioned Jesus as someone who models being assertive without being aggressive – that is he clearly states where he is and what he is about without getting angry – almost all of the time. I also mentioned that there is an exception to his usual way of interacting in the world, and today’s scripture from John is that exception. But this is not just Jesus losing it for no particular reason. As we shall see, there is more to the story than a few overturned tables.

John 2

This event in Jerusalem, where Jesus takes a whip made out of cords and drives out the moneychangers and those selling animals for sacrifice, not to mention the pilgrims who had come to express their devotion to the Hebrew faith, is shocking, is it not? In John, this event occurs at the beginning of his ministry, right after turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. The other gospels place this event during Holy Week.

John places this event here to tell us something about Jesus and his mission in the world. We are invited into the scene to see what Jesus is pointing to about his identity, and the way that he will be living out in the rest of the gospel.

Jesus travels to Jerusalem because of Passover and, like other pilgrims, he comes to the temple. John 2:13-15 provides rich detail of the scene. Although certainly different, the scene in John 2 is not entirely unlike Christian preparations for Easter. Believers gathered in a holy place, remembering God’s deliverance and seeking to honor God through rituals and repentance.

Yet, rather than praising those gathered, Jesus goes into a rage. Creating his own whip, Jesus chases out the animals, sending the merchants after them. He “pours out the coins” and turns over tables, causing the once “seated” moneychangers to scatter. He commands the dove-sellers: “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house an emporium!” (verse 16). Jesus effectively turns the temple court into a tumult of frightened animals and shouting merchants, while pilgrims and priests stand aghast. Why on earth would Jesus stop this?

Our clue is in the latter half of the text – Jesus argues that the Temple has become a selling place rather than a place of true devotion to God, and rests his premise on a particular authority. He is not a simple pilgrim come to do his obligations; he is, in fact the Son of God – he talks about the Temple being “my father’s house” and when questioned for a sign of his authority, he predicts that if they destroy “this temple”, in three days he will raise it up.

Jesus is making a case for the incarnation – for those who see him to know that God has sent his son to earth to show a new way of being in relationship with God. The Temple practices are not criticized here except to call it a market in the outer temple; instead Jesus invites us all into the journey of faith and belief in him, the Logos, the Word of God and Son of God.

Our Lenten study book, *Grounded*, emphasizes one pole of theological thinking that in previous generations, has not been highly affirmed – the notion that God is immanent – that God is everywhere. God’s spirit permeates the whole creation, and humans in particular are formed of the earth and God’s spirit – we become “animated dirt.” The incarnation of God in Jesus is the fulfillment of this idea – that the presence of God came to earth as a human to show the whole world a different way.

Because we believe in the incarnation, then we take Jesus’ words seriously about being the new temple. In place of stones and symbols, in Jesus we have the example of a life, of his love and grace and sacrifice, sent by a most-loving God and figured into a humble human body.

This Jesus will show new ways to a wide variety of people in John’s gospel, from the Jewish leader Nicodemus to the Samaritan woman, to feeding hungry crowds of 5,000 to the woman caught in adultery. He will bring his friend Lazarus back to life. His body will be put on the line, he will face crowds jeering him, and in the end *his temple, his body*, will be destroyed, but that will not be the last word.

This notion of bodies and temples is throughout our new testament. It isn’t only John who speaks of bodies as temples. Paul writes to the Corinthian church:

“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.”
1 Corinthians 6:19-20

If both John and Paul are telling us something essential about where and how we might find God,

we too are people of the Incarnation in the truest sense,

We too are called to look, to see,
to break bread, share wine,
and serve one another by washing feet.

How can we learn to see our embodied lives, our sensory lives, our physical lives, as fully implicated in our lives with God? How can we offer God our whole selves?

Respecting all our bodies entails taking care of them – by eating good things, getting enough sleep, avoiding addictive substances and activities, and exercising them. We only get one body, and it is up to us to take care of it as best as we can.

If we see our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit, created by God, then we respect each other's actual bodies. Barbara Brown Taylor, a pastor and preacher, writes that it is not possible to lean into God's love for my body, without simultaneously recognizing that God loves "all bodies everywhere." The "bodies of the hungry children and indentured women along with the bodies of sleek athletes and cigar-smoking tycoons." "One of the truer things about bodies," Taylor concludes, "is that it is just about impossible to increase the reverence I show mine without also increasing the reverence I show yours."

I think of Matthew 25 – when Jesus talks about feeding and clothing bodies as acts we are called upon to enact – not as just good acts, but foundational to the incarnation. When we feed and clothe and give medical care and house people, we are showing the way of Jesus in the world.

We show the way of Jesus with mission trips, often involving medical treatments, or build houses in Mexico for families who have inadequate shelter. We show the way of Jesus through the Nursing Home ministry (in pre-pandemic times) whose members visited residents to bring them social times and prayer and caring and through donations to Peaches Pantry, the Food Bank and other organizations providing concrete assistance.

This is the work of Jesus *in the world* because God sent Jesus *that the world might be saved*. The temple in Jerusalem did get destroyed about 70 CE, but by then, the work of Jesus began to spread throughout the known world – as the Book of Acts tells us, Paul made it as far as Rome, the center of the Roman Empire, and from there, down to today, with our bodies, with our faith, the work continues.

So friends, I encourage to consider your bodies as temples, and those around you as well. Consider how God is calling us to participate in his saving work in the world, because of God's great love!

Conclusion

Symeon the New Theologian

*For if we genuinely love Him,
we wake up inside Christ's body*

*where all our body, all over,
every most hidden part of it,
is realized in joy as Him,
and He makes us, utterly, real,*

*and everything that is hurt, everything
that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,
maimed, ugly, irreparably
damaged, is in Him transformed*

*and recognized as whole, as lovely,
and radiant in His light
he awakens as the Beloved
in every last part of our body.*