

ZEAL FOR YOUR HOUSE

John 2.13-18

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GATHERING

Pastor Jennifer is preaching at another congregation this morning but I am still struck by her sermon from last week. If you didn't hear it, I encourage you to go to the website and listen.

At the end of the sermon she reminded us that we say “we are a community of faith united in exploring what it means to *follow* of the way of Jesus. And Jesus says: “If you want to become my followers, deny yourselves and take up your cross.” And I know – I know from personal experience – that this verse has been used in a lot of unhealthy and self-destructive ways.

But what Pastor Jennifer said was:

Beloved, as you seek to follow the way of Jesus, do not shy away from the messy places both external and internal. And don't be alarmed when Jesus leads you to that which is broken and misidentified. Do not fear when life around you, or when your own life, unravels. Simply carry that light and shine love and truth wherever it is desperately needed.

There are a lot of things that try to claim my loyalty. But this morning, I have decided to follow the way that is lit by love and truth. If that's what it means to follow the way of Jesus, well I have decided to follow Jesus. Will you join me? And will you stand as you are able and sing together, “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus”?

Anthem: “Create in Me a Clean Heart” – John Carter

Sermon

We move this morning from the prayer for a clean heart in Psalm 51 to this story we have sometimes called “the cleansing of the Temple” – which I have never understood because it sounds to me like Jesus is making a mess rather than cleaning anything up.

But I guess it is true that sometimes the only way to clean things up is to start by making a mess; turning things upside down, throwing things out, disrupting the status quo in order to confront those fears and that inertia that keep us stuck in unhealthy patterns and injustice.

Perhaps a clean heart and cleansing the Temple have in common a willingness to not “shy away from the messy places” in order to shine the light of love and truth wherever it is desperately needed,” as Pastor Jennifer says.

Now if you are, as Dr. Hunter believes you are, looking at your bibles or your electronic devices to read along the text for today, you already realize that there is problem. The text listed in your bulletin this morning is *not* Mark 2.13-18. It is *John* 2.13-17. But you knew that.

So here’s the story near the beginning of the gospel of John. And you can follow along in your bulletin.

Since it was almost the Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the Temple, he found people selling cattle, sheep and pigeons, while moneychangers sat at their counters. Making a whip out of cords, Jesus drove them all out of the Temple – even the cattle and sheep – and overturned the tables of the moneychangers, scattering their coins. Then he faced the pigeon sellers: “Take all this out of here! Stop turning God’s house into a market!” The disciples remembered the words of scripture: “Zeal for your house consumes me.”

Now there are a couple things you might want to know about this story.

First, by the time this story is written and it is being read, the Temple has already been destroyed. In 70 C.E., the Romans having had enough of this rebellious and trouble-making part of the world, march the 10th Legion into Palestine and destroy Jerusalem and the Temple, leaving hundreds of thousands dead and ecological destruction that was intended to render the place uninhabitable.

Both the writer and the readers would know this. And so the story is not exactly about the past. It is a metaphor for the present. And we know that because of what follows. When asked by what authority Jesus is committing this act of disruption, he says: “Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up.” The people say: “It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple, and you’re going to raise it up in three days?”

And then the narrator comes in to clarify: “But the temple he was speaking of was his body and it was only after Jesus had been raised from the dead that the disciples remembered this and believed the scripture and the words Jesus had spoken.”

In other words, we are to understand this story as a metaphor for how we live our lives *in our bodies* – how we *physically* engage the world; what we *do* in the face of oppression; where we *embody* our energy for the things that matter.

After all, John’s story about Jesus begins: “The Word became *flesh* and lived among us and we have seen this Word’s glory full of grace and truth.”

This story isn’t just about the ideas we have about the world. It’s not about the stories we have to tell about the past. It’s about how we live *in our bodies* right now.

The second thing you might want to know – and perhaps you already know – is that there were people called “zealots” with a particular

agenda for resisting the Empire and attacking the religious system which was complicit with it.

Some of you read Reza Aslan's book *Zealot*. Aslan says:
To be clear, Jesus was not a member of the Zealot Party that launched the war with Rome, because no such party could be said to exist for another thirty years after his death. Nor was Jesus a violent revolutionary bent on armed rebellion, though his views on the use of violence were far more complex than is often assumed.

You can imagine that if you were a money-changer in the Temple or a livestock dealer or a poor pigeon seller, you might have a different view of just how non-violent the resistance of Jesus was. There was that whip, after all.

Nonetheless, according to Aslan, Jesus was not a member of the Zealot Party because that came after his time. He was, however, *zealous*, and the story says that, witnessing this act of disruption in the Temple, the disciples remembered that line from the Psalms: "Zeal for your house consumes me."

In other words, whatever zeal Jesus had was not about being a member of a particular political party.

And it probably helps to note two other things.

Unlike the other gospels, in the act of disrupting the Temple, John does not have Jesus quote Isaiah: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations." Here, the action is identified with a line from Psalm 69.

And, while all the other gospels tell this story as the beginning of the end following Palm Sunday, John puts it right up front. This story is where it all begins – which is why Reza Aslan says: "Above all, this singular event [this disruption of the Temple] explains why a simple peasant

from the low hills of Galilee was seen as such a threat to the established system that he was hunted down, arrested, tortured, and executed.”

Don't be confused, John says, whatever happens to Jesus at the end, started with him messing things up at the beginning.

I was intrigued about why it is that John tells this story with reference to Psalm 69. And see if this doesn't sound like the rest of the story about Jesus in the gospel of John:

⁷ It is for your sake that I have borne reproach,
that shame has covered my face.

⁸ I have become a stranger to my kindred,
an alien to my mother's children.

⁹ It is zeal for your house that has consumed me;
the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.

¹⁰ When I humbled my soul with fasting, *
they insulted me for doing so.

¹¹ When I made sackcloth my clothing,
I became a byword to them.

¹² I am the subject of gossip for those who sit in the gate,
and drunkards make songs about me ...

¹⁶ Answer me, O LORD, for your steadfast love is good;
according to your abundant mercy, turn to me ...

²⁰ Insults have broken my heart,
so that I am in despair.

I looked for pity, but there was none;
and for comforters, but I found none.

²¹ They gave me poison for food,
and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.

If those last lines sound familiar they are pretty much how John ends his story in John 19.

So if this is how the story ends, why would John want to begin this way? Couldn't we start with a nice story about babies and starlight and angels and wise ones? Why rush right into all this unpleasantness?

I remind you that, by the time John is writing this story and it is being read, horrible tragic things have happened in the world.

And the question might be: "Where is God in all this?"

And this reference to Psalm 69 maybe gives us a clue about the embodiment of this weird thing he calls "zeal" that seems to set the stage for the rest of the life of Jesus.

In Psalm 69, zeal is *persistence* in the face of relentless attack and defeat. Jesus and the psalmist can't seem to get anything right. No matter what they do, they are the objects of suspicion and scorn and attack:

¹⁰ When I humbled my soul with fasting,^{*}
they insulted me for doing so.

¹¹ When I made sackcloth my clothing,
I became a byword to them.

¹² I am the subject of gossip for those who sit in the gate,
and drunkards make songs about me.

I can talk about how much God loves the world, Jesus might say, and I can have spiritual conversations with a religious leader about new life and a Samaritan woman about freedom and a political ruler about truth and it all adds up to just one more reason people – especially people in power – want to shut me down.

But zeal is persistence in the face of relentless defeat.

And zeal is also *passion for* something. "Zeal for my house consumes me." It isn't just that Jesus wants to disrupt the oppressive system that exploits and denigrates people.

Actions that boil over from our anger against injustice is one thing. But this is zeal. And zeal is a passion *for* something. And, in this case, it is passion for the very thing that has been tainted and broken and corrupted. It is zeal *for your house*. It is passion for a house that abundant, overflowing, steadfast love has built.

Sometimes the zeal we see is just anger at the way things are. It's destructive and doesn't care about who or what gets pulled down with it.

But this is different. This is zeal that is a passion *for* something.

And if I needed an illustration, I don't have to look very far this morning. I don't have to look any further than the young people of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and their #NeverAgain movement.

They know that attempts at gun reform have been tried before and have been met with relentless defeat. They know – personally – that their work and they themselves are under attack. They know that people say this whole gun thing is too messy and too complicated to ever get anywhere.

But they have zeal. They are persisting in the face of relentless defeat.

And they have zeal because they have a passion for something. They have a passion for their “house” that has just lost 17 of its members. They have zeal for their generation and for a home where people come together to celebrate life rather than comforting one another in the loss of it.

Zeal for their house has consumed them!

And that isn't the only zeal on display in this messy and complicated world of ours.

There is the persistence of those who will not give up in the face of relentless defeat at the hands of white supremacy - those who have a passion for a different kind of house in which we all can live.

There is the persistence of women in the face of relentless defeat about their rights and their bodies who have a passion for a different kind of house in which we all can live.

There is the persistence of those who live their lives in the face of relentless personal defeat who go on with a passion for that house where goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives.

John's story about the way of Jesus starts with zeal – persistence in the face of relentless defeat and with passion for a house that steadfast, abundant love has built.

And if Pastor Jennifer is right that following Jesus is to not shy away from the messy places in the world and in our own lives and to shine love and truth wherever it is desperately needed, then I have to say this morning: “I have decided to follow Jesus ...”

Don't turn back, beloved. This is not the time to turn back. This is the time for zeal.

And today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York, Random House, 2013), pp. 73-79.