

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
Beyond Beliefs part 3: Full of Grace and *Truth*
John 2:13-24
January 21, 2018

I once knew a deacon who was a bit unstable. When you saw him, you never knew what you were going to get. He was known for getting up on his soapbox and ranting about the Book of Revelations, the flag, and the end of times.

More than once he went off on some tirade against the pastor because of some rumor he'd heard. And most of it sounded like the ramblings of a mad man that made no sense.

More than once he started to preach at the other deacons about the blood of Jesus, and needing to get things right, and repenting so that God would heal our land.

You never knew what he was going to do or say. He was a loose cannon. But the other deacons saw all that passion and remembered this story of Jesus in the temple, and figured all that passion must be "zeal for the Lord."

So, they decided to make him... [pause]
the chair of the deacons.

In his new role he went on a witch-hunt.

He began chasing demons behind every curtain, holding secret meetings to get rid of the pastor. When it came to light that his accusations were based on false rumors and lies, he turned his passion to another staff member in the church.

He wanted to have his witch trial one way or another.

He was set on turning over tables... because he was pretty sure that he was a prophet.

What he refused to see....

was that the table that needed turning,... was his own.

Jesus walks into the temple one day... and starts turning over tables himself. And yes, it's more than a bit disruptive. Jesus is causing a scene here. And everyone is wondering what in the world is going on.

So, at first everyone jumps back.

A moment later, you hear over the speakers, "Um, we've got a code yellow in aisle 9." And the temple authorities come running over,

"What sign can you show us for causing all this mess?"

Or as we might put it, "What's the meaning of all this?" "What sign can you show us?"

It's a good question, you know.

I mean people are just going about their normal worshiping business in the way it's been done for generations.

You see, if you lived say, in Galilee, and you wanted to come and make your annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover, and you wanted to sacrifice an animal, it wasn't very practical to bring a goat with you all that way.

So instead, you'd sell your goat back home, bring the money with you, and use that money to buy an animal at the temple gates. This is how the system worked.

It was practical. This is what people had done for generations.
It's what Jesus is angry about on this day.

So, why in the world does Jesus lose it on this day? **“What’s the meaning of all this?”**

It's an important question, especially for this story. For one thing, there are too many folks like that deacon I once knew, who see their own angry reactions and outbursts, in Jesus' actions in the temple and think their fiery anger is somehow righteous.

So, the first thing we need to know is this isn't just some angry outburst for Jesus.
This... is a planned protest.

And the two are not the same. When you study the other accounts of this moment in the other gospels, it's pretty clear Jesus doesn't just go off his rocker here. He is being intentional. He has thought this through. He enters the temple that day knowing exactly what he's going to do.

You see, the people traveling from out of town weren't the only ones buying at the temple gates...the status quo at the temple... as normal and ordinary as it was... had also become a system that was oppressive to the poor and marginalized, the unclean and the outsider.

But to understand, you need to remember that the theology of the day suggested that if you were poor, or suffering, or marginalized... then it probably means you did something to sin against God. You were getting what you deserved.

It was your fault.

It was your sin... that had caused your suffering

This will come up again in John 9. Some of you remember that story where there is a man born blind and Jesus' disciples ask him, was he born blind because of his own sin or because of his parents' sin. Remember that story?

I'm not quite sure how you can be born blind because of your own sin. I don't think there's a lot of sinning going on in the womb. But that was how their theology worked.

Of course, that kind of theology sounds kind of crazy to our ears, right? We know that's not how things work.

[laughing some]

I mean you could imagine... blaming the blind man for his own blindness... blaming the victim for their suffering

I mean... can you imagine telling... oh, I don't know...
someone that was raped, “Well, you shouldn't have been wearing that.”

I mean, can you imagine telling... oh, I don't know...

someone who only had food to eat when they were at school, and whose single parent worked a dead end job until late at night, and who had to take care of their younger sister before and after school,

“well, you should have worked harder at your grades

and gone to college

and then you wouldn't have to work for minimum wage.”

Hard to fathom, right?

I mean... can you imagine telling... oh, I don't know,
someone who was brought to the U.S. at age 5 without legal status, "Well, you shouldn't have
broken the law. Now you have to pay for your crime..."

"Was it the blind man's sin or his parents' sin that caused his blindness?"

That's how it worked in Jesus' day, you see. If you were poor, or sick, or suffering, or
marginalized in some way... it must have been some sin *you* committed.

I'm glad we've come so far...

But in that time, in order to make things right, you had to go to the temple and make a sacrifice.
It's how you got back in God's good graces...
and the society's good graces.

But chances are you don't have the right animal for your sin, so you'll have to purchase one...

.... It was just an ironic coincidence that your purchase happened to line the pockets of the
religious and the political powers of the day.

[pause]

This was part of what was going on at the temple. That was the system. It's just how things were.

Most folks didn't think about it. It was normal. No one set out to do anything wrong.

But the temple had become a system preserving the status quo between the powerful... and the
marginalized.

A system counter to God's desire for shalom... for wholeness and flourishing.

A system counter to the Kingdom of God... Jesus is always talking about.

Truth be told, it's *not* how most people thought about the temple. They just thought about it as
the holy place, where they could worship God.

They just sort of did their thing.

Not asking too many questions.

But Jesus has this funny way... of looking at the heart of things.
He sees beyond the concrete surface... He recognizes the pattern.

And one of the things Jesus does again and again, is *challenge us to look deeper...*

to see what we'd rather not notice...

what makes us uncomfortable.

You see, back in John chapter 1, in the Prologue of John's Gospel, in the introduction to this whole
story, we're told that Jesus comes *full of grace and truth*.

And last week at the wedding of Cana,

we encountered the fullness of that grace... a grace where new wine comes and fills our
emptiness.

But this week...at the temple, the very next story,

we're encountering the fullness of truth.

Jesus is challenging us to see...what we tend to ignore...

He does this in all kinds of ways throughout his ministry, but here in the temple...

Jesus does that by turning over tables.
It's another one of **the signs**, John tells us in verse 23.

It's not some kind of flash of anger.
It is planned protest.
Shocking protest, yes.
But protest meant to wake us up...to help us see that something isn't right here.
The status quo... is **not** OK...with our God.

You see, there is a fundamental difference between **reactionary anger**,
and **anger that fuels a fire in us to act courageously in the face of injustice**.
There is a fundamental difference between **reacting**, and **subverting**.

But just like that deacon I told you about,
when we're reading about the protest on the printed page,
we so often confuse the two... one for the other.
Have you noticed that?

Whether it's reading about Jesus' protest in the temple,
or reading about protests in our streets.

We often misunderstand what is going on... assuming people are just reacting. And so, we sit
from the comfort of our living rooms, making judgments about people's intentions... without looking
deeper and asking,

"What is the meaning of all this?"

We assume that they are getting all worked up, just reacting to:
 one incident,
 one ruling,
 one shooting,
 one president...
and ignore the power systems that they are exposing & subverting.

We miss the very possibility... the possibility that the protests in our streets,
might be inspired by Jesus' protest in Jerusalem,
 which was inspired by the protests of the prophets throughout the Old Testament.

"What is the meaning of this? Can you show us some sign?" they ask him.

It's a good question, you know.

It's the question we should always ask when we come across a protest.... because our first
impression is probably wrong.

Shoot, our second impression is probably wrong too. Did you notice how that happened to Jesus?

He answered them, "Tear this temple down, I will rebuild it in three days." They thought he was
talking about the literal bricks and mortar...

 but again, he was trying to help them see...
 to see beyond the surface of things.

He was trying to help them see...
 that what they came looking for in the temple,

they could find in his flesh and blood.
No money required.

He was trying to help them to see that the heartbeat of God was pulsing through his veins.

Because if they could learn to recognize God in him, then maybe... maybe
they could learn to recognize the heartbeat of God pulsing through.... all of creation...
radically available to everyone!

This is our third Sunday in the Gospel of John, soaring up on the eagle to see the horizon beyond the concrete in front of us. And today we can't get away from the troubling reality that the One who brings *grace*, is also the one who brings *truth*.

When we encounter God, we always encounter both.
Grace & Truth: They come to us hand-in-hand.

And the honest truth is if we want to keep going on this journey with Jesus... if we want to keep seeing more, if we want to taste his grace, then we will also taste his truth.

Which means... there are probably some tables...
that are going to need overturning...
in each of us.

John ends this part of the story by writing, "Jesus would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people... he knew what was in everyone."

Jesus can see. He knows what is in every one of us.
He knows the tables cluttering your heart... getting in the way.

And so I wonder...

if in the next few moments, as we prepare for communion,
if you might be brave enough... and courageous enough...
to invite Jesus...
to come and turn over
the tables in your heart that have cluttered your soul...
the tables you are so used to, you don't even notice them anymore...
the tables that are maintaining the status quo
and getting in the way of God's dream for the world...
and God's dream for your life.

Jesus knows what is in you...

Jesus knows better than you do.
So let's invite him to do his work in us, even now.

Prayer:

O holy One of God...

we confess there is much we do not want to face in our life

there is much about the status quo that we are quite comfortable with.

Forgive us for trusting our dreams for this life... more than your dream for us.

Forgive us for ignoring uncomfortable truths

Help us to trust your grace enough... to allow your truth into our hearts.

In the silence of this moment... show us what tables need turning over:

[silent prayers...]

May your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, and in us we pray

Amen.

Silent Reflection.

*“Jesus’ appearance in our midst has made it undeniably clear that changing the human heart and changing human society are not separate tasks, but are as interconnected as the two beams of the cross.” Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*.*

Communion Prep:

The One who turns over the tables of our hearts,

and turns over the tables of our world,

comes and sets a new table

a different kind of table... where all are welcome, to bring all that they are... and receive his life... his grace and truth.

It was on the night he was betrayed....