

Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 21, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 127: 1-2; John 2: 13-25

Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

Are you someone who makes lists on tablets, scrap paper or your cell phone? List of those things you need to remember to pick up at the store, the people to call about an upcoming event, those things you want to get done around the house, the articles you need to prepare for the newsletter, bulletin, annual report ---- oh, wait that's my list. Many of us wake up with a plan of what we want to accomplish that day and check off each task as it's accomplished. Nothing like a "to do" list with everything crossed off to inspire a sense of satisfaction. Then---- there are those other days when there is one interruption after another and you have to push aside your list to deal with something or someone you hadn't anticipated. We call it a disruption. We rarely like disruptions when we're preparing Thanksgiving dinner, working feverishly to get a project finished by a deadline, or trying to get on the road for vacation. Then there are times when the disruption proves to be as important as or more important than what we had planned.

Jesus was one heck of a disruption in our gospel story today. It's Passover — a high holy day — in Jerusalem. The city is crowded and busy with pilgrims who have made their way to this traditional center of Judaism. Many are anxious to get to the holy Temple ---- the place where God's presence was assured and the only place for the prescribed animal offering. Like prayer, such offerings were intended to be a way to get closer to God and express thanksgiving and repentance. With many people traveling a good distance from home, it made sense to wait to buy the animal you wanted to have sacrificed in Jerusalem. Then there was the matter of a temple tax required of all males over 20 years of age, to support the upkeep and

the maintenance of the holy Temple. Roman coins, with their images of Caesar, would not be accepted at the Temple. Now there's a need for some place to change your currency. Out of all these needs arose the arrangement for animal sellers and moneychangers to be on Temple grounds. It made it more convenient for pilgrims and more expedient, especially during times of high volume, like Passover. What is it that sets Jesus off?

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, this scene shows up near the end of Jesus' ministry. It is one of the climatic events that tips the scale against Jesus and sets the religious authorities on the path to have him killed. In those other gospels, Jesus calls the place a "den of thieves," implying there is some kind of price gouging, unfair practices or shifty business practices going on. But here in John's gospel, this story of Jesus clearing the Temple is at the beginning of Jesus public ministry. Instead of a "den of thieves" Jesus says, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace" as he swings a whip to drive out the animals. Which leads to two primary questions — Where is the calm, gentle, non-violent healer and teacher Jesus we are use to seeing. If it is not about unfair business practices, what does Jesus see that is so wrong at the Temple?

The gospel writer John has an important, world-changing story to tell. "He wastes no time... John's Jesus is neither passive nor gentle. He comes with fire and passion right out of the gate."¹ "Jesus is far more confrontational than we often imagine. It is a characteristic of His work in the world. Jesus is constantly disrupting things, whether it be on the corporate level of, say, a religious establishment, or on the personal level of an individual's life. Wasn't it our Lord who used the purification jars to hold wine instead of water at a wedding in Cana? (John 2:1-11) And what about the lives of his followers? Did Jesus not cause substantial disruption in their

lives? Fishermen who were successful enough to have boats and hired hands left their livelihoods behind to follow Jesus... An affluent tax collector walked away from a lucrative business and the security it gave him in order to journey with Jesus... Jesus disrupted the lives of Mary Magdalene, Mary, Salome and countless other followers. Jesus had that kind of disruptive influence upon people's lives."

Jesus still has that kind of disruptive influence on people's lives today [when we take Jesus seriously], doesn't He? Our presence here this morning [rather than another place] bears witness to some degree of Christ's disruptive work in our lives through the Holy Spirit. Career choices and goals have been altered and reshaped. Family relationships and lifestyles have been interrupted." ² When we respond in faith and obedience to follow Jesus, there will be costs and disruptions as we collide with the values and expectations of the people and cultural norms that surround us. "Now as then, followers and antagonists alike have been disrupted by Jesus' presence and work among them. The cleansing of the temple is really but one event in Jesus' totally disruptive ministry."

But why is Jesus doing his disruptive thing at the Temple, which has been a cornerstone of Jewish identity since Solomon? Why attack the sacrificial tradition prescribed in scripture? Perhaps he questions whether the Temple and its rituals have become merely about business and rules rather than drawing near to God. Maybe Jesus was warning that, in practice, the religious institution, customs or leaders had become more central than God had. We all know that is a danger in any church. It is far too easy, over time, for even faithful folks to cross a line into the worship of a building, traditions, a style of worship or music or their own comfort rather than worship God. Is this what Jesus was seeing when he saw the animals

and moneychangers in the Temple? Or, did he think the entrenched systems excluded the poor or the marginal folks from participating. Maybe all of it.

In John's gospel, Jesus wastes no time signaling that God is up to something new. Not that Judaism was no longer valid, but God was moving it toward a new center, a new access to the presence of God, a different way to be assured of God's forgiveness and love. That new center, access and way was Jesus — God's Word made flesh living among them. It may have seemed like a wild or arrogant claim. "Who do you think you are? What sign can you show us for doing this?" "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," Jesus replies. "A temple that has taken over 46 years to construct and you'll do it in three days."

Outrageous. Until. Until they come to realize that access to God is not confined to the Temple —, which will be destroyed by the time John writes his gospel. God is with you wherever you are. The Lord is found in following Jesus, God-made-flesh, who will live, die and after three days rise. In Jesus, everyone can come to know God and know they are loved, forgiven, redeemed and cherished by God. It seems like such good and amazing news. Yet it overturns tables on those who would have God stay in heaven or become our people's domesticated pet. God here, God now, God loving unconditionally begs for a response — like following Jesus rather than going on solo or going the way of the world.

"We belong to one disruptive Lord. And this Lord of ours is bent on overturning anything and everything that hinders His brothers and sisters from life-giving devotion and service to God our Father and to one another. This disruptive Lord of ours does not passively abandon persons and institutions which he has called into being and commissioned with a task to do. [Instead,] our loving Lord boldly confronts that which is inappropriate within us and among us for the purpose

of making us and our churches clean, whole, faithful,” at peace and full of overflowing and abundant life.

So may we continue praising our loving and merciful God for stirring us to faithfulness. May we thank God for showering upon us gifts of the Spirit for special works to do which interrupt “life-as-usual”. May we praise God for disturbing our complacent lives through Christ Jesus our Lord.” Praise God for disrupting us with things we **can** do when we want to say we are too old, too young, too tired, too disabled, too busy. Praise God who tirelessly, disruptively works to make us more nearly the persons and the community God created us to be³ — persons and a church that will disrupt hatred, hunger, prejudice, injustice and indifference with the passion and love of Christ. Thanks be to God!

Linda M Alessandri 1/20/18

ENDNOTES

-
1. “Preaching Themes” for January 21, 2018, 2017-18 Worship Resources Copyright 2017 Clergy Stuff
 2. Robert A. Bryant, “Jesus Christ: One Disruptive Lord” as posted on <https://www.preaching.com>
 3. Portions quoted and other parts adapted from the sermon by Robert A. Bryant, “Jesus Christ: One Disruptive Lord” as posted on <https://www.preaching.com>