

## Justice, Zeal and Foolishness

As I have confessed in this place before, I have a temper. I hope most of you know this because I have told you about it and few know it because you have seen it in action. I like to think that I am mellowing with age but I am still well aware that I am at danger, from time to time, of absolutely losing my cool over relatively trivial provocation. One of the ways in which I have excused this failing from time to time is to say that I come by it honestly. The Boyers and the Glazes, for as far back as I have known about them, have been a bunch of hotheads. My dad has a ferocious temper, which he apparently inherited from his father, whom I never knew but I've heard the stories. My mom, when she was well, could get her dander up pretty well too, though I remember her as being slower to anger and quicker to forgive than Dad. The family legend about her father, my Papa Troy Glaze, was that he gave up drinking as a young man after an alcohol-fueled bar brawl in which he put out another man's eye by hitting him while wearing brass knuckles. If you believe in such things, you might attribute this familial trait to the Irish inheritance on both sides of the family. Or maybe you would have concurred with my friends in years gone by, when my hair and beard were more red than grey, who accused me of having a "red-headed" disposition.

So, I've always felt a certain personal resonance with the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple, a story found in all four Gospels, though with certain differences. A Jesus who sometimes got bent out of shape about something and lit somebody up with a reproof like "Get thee behind me, Satan" or who overturned some tables on occasion seemed a whole lot more human and accessible to me sometimes than the ever-gracious one who said "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." But I can't use Jesus as an excuse for my faults. After all, to be perfectly honest, I'm most likely to lose my temper when *my* pride is at stake, when I feel that *I've* been slighted. But Jesus' ire is on behalf of others. As the versions of this story in the Synoptic Gospels tell us, the merchants and bankers in the Temple were taking advantage of other people and as John points out, it was zeal for his Father's house that consumed Jesus. This morning, I want to examine the possible causes of Jesus' outburst and what they and the teaching of Paul about the foolishness of the Gospel can teach us about how to live as followers of Jesus.

Although our lectionary Gospel passage this morning is from John, I want to look first at the way the Synoptics, Matthew, Mark and Luke, tell this story. The three are nearly identical, so let's use Mark, often considered the oldest of the Gospels, as our comparison. Mark 11:15-18 tells the story if you are interested in following along. In verse 17, after he has expelled the merchants and money-changers and overturned their tables, Jesus says, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." Now, what exactly was Jesus' complaint? Theoretically, these business people were providing a needed service for those who had come to the Temple to worship. Those who sold animals for sacrifice were there to eliminate the need for those who were coming from a long distance to have to transport their own livestock for the sacrifice. Not only would traveling with animals make a journey to Jerusalem more difficult but what if the animal became sick or injured along the way? Then you would not be able to offer it because Leviticus 22 clearly teaches that an animal offered to God in sacrifice must be without blemish. Likewise, the money in current use could not be used to pay the required tithe because it had graven images, often the portrait of the Emperor, upon it. Only certain coins, more difficult to come by, with only the numeral of the denomination of the coin engraved, could be used. How offensive it would surely be to God to present an offering which directly contradicted the Commandment: "Thou shalt not make unto

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thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”

The most obvious problem with all this was that it had become big business. The merchants in the Temple were not there out of a sense of religious duty or in an attempt to make worship easier for their fellow Jews. They were not a part of, even if such a thing had been known in that day, a non-profit organization. They were there to make a living or, at least in some instances, a killing. They were charging unreasonable prices for the animals, unfair exchange rates for the money, because they had a captive audience. People had to take their offers, unfair though they might be, if they wanted to make their planned sacrifice. It is likely that Temple officials were taking a kickback from this lucrative business, so they would have been unsympathetic to any complaints. And, after decades of such abuse, people were unlikely to complain. People get used to bad treatment and injustice. It's why today people faced with bad government will so often just shrug and say, "Oh, well, you can't beat City Hall." Just as their ancestors had done centuries before, in the time of Jeremiah, the merchants have made God's house a den of robbers. That's Jeremiah 7:11 that Jesus quotes to them when he talks about a den of robbers. And as is so often the case, Jesus is particularly aware of the impact these dishonest business people are having on the poor. Both Matthew and Mark specifically mention the sellers of doves as the recipients of Jesus' wrath. Doves, you see, were the substitute sacrifice named in Scripture for those who could not afford to slaughter an ox, a cow or a lamb. Remember that Jesus himself, as an infant, had been redeemed as a first-born son by a pair of doves. The sellers of doves for whom profit was the only motive were extorting their high fees from the very poor.

There is another problem, as well, and the clue to it is in the other half of Jesus' quotation: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations," a quotation from Isaiah 56:7. The Temple, as you may remember, was built as a series of concentric boxes. At the core was the Holy of Holies, the place where the Glory of God dwelt, entered only by the High Priest and only once a year. Just outside the Holy of Holies was the Holy Place, with the altar of incense, the Bread of the Presence of God, and the choir of Levites, singing the Psalms. Surrounding these was the Court of the Priests, where only priests could enter, then the Court of the Men, then the Court of the Women. The outermost ring of the compound was the Court of the Gentiles, where anyone wishing to worship the God of Israel could come and pray. It is here that the merchants had set up their businesses. Many have theorized that the Court of the Gentiles was so full of animal pens and money tables, so raucous with the calls of those hawking their wares that a God-fearing Gentile could hardly squeeze into the place, let alone find a place to focus on prayer and worship of the Living God. Instead of being a house of prayer for all peoples, the Temple in Jerusalem had become a place where all but the Chosen were excluded, a place where all but the wealthy were preyed upon.

The illustration on the front of our bulletin by Cerezo Barredo brings this story right into our own time. As a group of the poor in *campesinos* attire look on from the background, Jesus kicks over tables laden with coins and what look to be U.S. dollar bills while threatening a man with *Norte Americano* features wearing a nice business suit. The placards falling off the tables read "Cambio," Spanish for "exchange." It's a word one often sees these days as part of the phrase, "*cambio de cheques*," "check cashing," and it is the sign of one of the most predatory businesses in the modern world, where paychecks or assistance checks are cashed at exorbitant fees for

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those without bank accounts and where so-called “payday loans” are issued which trap the unwary, again often the poorest among us, into never-ending cycles of debt. The robbers may have moved out of the places of worship in our culture but they have established their dens deep in the precincts of our society’s Temple of Commerce. Barredo’s illustration is a good reminder that much of the world are grateful for the very real charity of the ordinary U.S. citizen but that they see our government and our corporations in league with those who tax them in order to fill accounts at the World Bank or to buy weapons often used to enslave them or to squirrel away in private out-of-country accounts.

In John’s account, we do not find Jesus quoting from Isaiah or from Jeremiah but his actions remind his disciples later of a verse from the Psalms. Psalm 69:9 says “It is zeal for your house that has consumed me.” The psalmist goes on to speak of how those who stand in opposition to God have also turned against his servant. Jesus’ intense passion in removing what he saw as the corruption in his Father’s house surely prompted John to think of this verse, but I think there is something else, too. Mark and Luke record that it was this incident in the Temple that confirmed the desire of the priests to have Jesus killed. Can we say that, like the psalmist, Jesus attracted the wrath of those who stood against God as well? Is it reasonable to say this about the leaders of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judaism? Jesus certainly had not been shy about accusing other religious leaders of leading people away from God by putting their focus on onerous regulations about life and worship. Those in charge of the Temple, it seems, are guilty of the same. It is their absolute insistence upon ritual purity, the condition of the animal sacrificed, the type of coin used to pay tithes, which has allowed the predatory merchants access to the Temple grounds and given them license to prey upon the worshippers. The priests have made perfection of form their god, not the God of Abraham. Did they mean to do so? Almost assuredly not; they thought they were serving God and teaching God’s people by insisting on these forms of worship. But there is a verse in Psalm 19 which is not in the adaptation by Stephen Mitchell we used this morning as our call to worship that points to the problem both for those priests and for us: “Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults.” Sometimes, our best intentions lead us astray.

An artist whose work I have loved since I was a boy painted the scene of the Purification of the Temple at least four times. He was Domenicos Theotokopoulos, known as “El Greco,” the Greek. In one version of this scene, El Greco painted depictions of two Old Testament scenes carved into the Temple wall behind Jesus – obviously a bit of artistic license on the Greek’s part since such things would have been anathema to the Jews. On one side of Jesus is Abraham, preparing to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac; on the other, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The two carvings comment on the scene in the foreground of Jesus expelling the merchants. Just as Abraham would sacrifice anything to God, even his own son if he thought that was required, so would Jesus give up his life in God’s service, drawing the anger of the religious and business establishments whom he revealed as corrupt as well as the political power of Rome, whose representatives must have seen him as a dangerous radical. Adam and Eve, meanwhile, were driven from Earth’s first Paradise for putting their own will before God’s. They had become convinced that they knew better than God; that they could be gods. Now the merchants were driven from what Jews at the time considered the most beautiful place on Earth because they had made their desire for profit into a god. The priests, too, were culpable for they had transformed the beautiful and honest ritual of a farmer bringing of his best to the God he loved into a costly beauty pageant, where no country-born animal could be good enough, but

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only the specially nurtured and kept animals provided by the cronies of the priests. Anyone who will stand between those who would worship God and the altar and say “Your gift is not good enough; *you* are not good enough,” is setting themselves in God’s place and the wrath of God is rightly turned upon them.

Because, you see, it is not perfection as the world sees it that God is looking for from us. What God wants from us is humility, a willingness to be foolish on God’s behalf. What God wants from us is justice and mercy, qualities that the smart money will always call foolishness. Writing on John’s telling of the Cleansing of the Temple and the zeal which consumed Jesus, Scott Hoezee writes, “It’s about how the world sneers at us for claiming that a worship service is more valuable than anything that could ever happen in the citadels of worldly power... Maybe Jesus wanted to shake people up so they could remember that to have faith is a radical thing that should make us radically different from those who do not have faith.” Sometimes, in the cause of helping others, even radical anger can be an asset, if used prayerfully and in the service of hope. St. Augustine of Hippo said, “Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are Anger and Courage: Anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.” Our hope and our faith should be a radical thing, a foolish thing in the eyes of the world. Another long-time favorite of mine, Søren Kierkegaard wrote, “Remove from Christianity its ability to shock and it is altogether destroyed. It then becomes a tiny superficial thing, capable neither of inflicting deep wounds nor of healing them.” We must be willing for the sake of our faith to shock the world, to reject the world’s wisdom so that God can use us as God used Jesus and the Cross to affront the world, deeply wounding the world’s complacent wisdom, only in order to heal the world which God so dearly loves. Our calling is to die to the world, to die to selfish desire, to die to anything that comes between us and the love of God.

Does that sound daunting, too hard, frightening? Then hear the Good News, for there is deep and abiding hope here as well. “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.” Jesus is our model not only in how we live and in how we let die those parts of us that are mired in death but also in how God will raise us up. When we lose our lives for Jesus’ sake, then we will find them. The life of resurrection begins here and now as we allow the Spirit of God to infuse our lives and guide them, as we truly become the Body of Christ called the Church, and the resurrected life awaits us in a future Wedding Banquet that we can only begin to see dimly. No matter how the wisdom of the world may advise us, we can be assured that life is found in the foolishness of God; in loving our enemies, in putting the needs of others ahead of our own desires, in letting zeal for the house of God consume us utterly. Our hope is in doing right even when it is not smart. Vaclav Havel, playwright, human rights activist, the last President of Czechoslovakia and first President of the Czech Republic, wrote, “Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.” For us, the foolishness of God is what makes sense. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will fill our lives with hope, that we might walk in the way of Jesus, taking the Good News to the poor and to their oppressors alike, regardless of how it turns out.