

## Righteous Indignation

[Text - John 2:13-22]

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Just as Jesus often clashes with the firmly entrenched religious practices of his day, the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple also clashes with some of *our* firmly entrenched images of the mild-mannered Messiah. Nevertheless, this is one of those rare stories that's found in all four Gospel accounts; and the fact that this event is placed at the beginning of John's Gospel, indicates that - for John - this incident is crucial in understanding who Jesus is, and what his life and ministry are all about. The writer of *John* is quite deliberate in selecting which stories about Jesus he uses, and in what order they appear. Unlike the other Gospel writers, John isn't writing a chronological biography. He's more concerned with laying-out specific stories that reveal the tremendous significance of Jesus as the Messiah - the Anointed One.

John's up-front placement of the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple indicates that from the very start of his ministry, Jesus is prepared to boldly challenge the idea that the Holy One cares more about religious practices, than about people's lives. Jesus maintains that the purpose of any true religion is to remind those who seek to follow God, that they must treat all people with fairness and kindness, compassion and respect. And those who truly seek to love the holy One, will do so by loving all people - who are made in the Divine image and likeness. So much of Jesus' ministry involves his speaking-up for those who are routinely put-down by institutionalized religion. And this incident in the Temple indicates the extent to which Jesus is willing to go, to reform and redeem the corruption within his own faith tradition.

"Making a whip of cords, Jesus drove all of them out of the temple....He also poured out the coins of the money changers and

overturned their tables.” Seeing the house of Holy One being turned into a crass marketplace where people are told that they must *purchase* Divine forgiveness and blessing [at a marked-up price], fills Jesus with a righteous indignation. So he demonstrates - quite dramatically - that he has come to put a stop to the unscrupulous profiteering that is being carried out in the name, and in the house, of God.

Through his words and his actions, Jesus unequivocally declares that the abundance of Divine Compassion and Grace is *freely* available to *all* people! He literally “turns the tables” on those corrupt religious hucksters; yet they still have the audacity to ask him, “What *sign* can you show us for doing this?” [I think the fact that he singlehandedly drives-out those dishonest dealers from the Temple, would be a pretty good sign in-and-of itself!] Jesus obviously has a deeply rooted sense of a Divine authority; yet he also understands that behind their question, there lies this ominous threat: ‘If you attack our way of doing things and endanger our *livelihood*, then we will attack you and endanger your *life!*’ “What sign can you show us for doing this?” In other words, “what kind of power or position do you possess that allows *you* to challenge *us?*” Jesus responds, rather cryptically, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

Now, while the religious leaders think he’s talking about the surrounding structure of wood and stone, Jesus is actually referring to his own body of flesh and blood - a body in which the Holy One *truly* resides. And Jesus’ authority to challenge these misguided religious “authorities” comes from his willingness to stake his life on the ever-living power of Divine love. He knows that the True Presence of the Holy One isn’t found in a building made by human hands; but rather, lives deeply within the human heart. And Jesus has come, not only to embody the fulness of that Divine Presence within himself, but also to awaken it and raise it up within the hearts and lives of all people.

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

Jesus certainly knows the risk he’s taking, by taking-on the oppressive power of the religious and political establishment. He knows that by siding with the poor, the lowly, and the outcast, he himself will face rejection, suffering and - quite likely - even death! Yet Jesus is ‘consumed with zeal for the House of God.’ He is passionately convinced that the House of God is to be a place where all people can *freely* offer their prayer and praise. And he is equally passionate that the *Household* of God - the Family of Faith - be openly accessible to all. I think this is where this morning’s story can speak directly to you and me today.

Here at Brecksville United Church of Christ, we are quite intentional about extending a warm welcome to *all* people, regardless of who they are or where they are in their Life’s journey. However, there is still much more for us to do. There are still plenty of people around us who see the Church as an archaic and oppressive institution - One that’s more eager to offer condemnation, than compassion; to proclaim judgment and enmity, rather than justice and equality. Therefore, it is crucial that you and I - like Jesus - learn to express a righteous indignation whenever we see *anyone* being excluded, abused, or oppressed - especially those who religion or society regularly push-aside: the poor and powerless, the vulnerable and the perceived “outsider”.

Of course when we *do* this, it’s important that we avoid getting on our *own* moral high-horse. As Kathleen Norris reminds us in our Continuing Testament, “Human anger can never be as essentially righteous as Divine anger; in us, even well-placed anger all too easily becomes mean and self-serving.” [You’re preaching to the *preacher*, sister Norris!] We must remember that Jesus doesn’t ride into Jerusalem on a high-horse, but on a lowly donkey. And even though he is justifiably angry at the dishonorable actions of those he confronts, he still loves those individuals with his whole

heart. He loves them enough *to* confront them, to challenge them, and to sincerely try to help them change their ways - because he also doesn't want *them* to be excluded! In that same spirit, you and I today must strive to have that same blend of *passion* and *compassion*; so that like Jesus, we can express our anger and then let it go - trusting that Divine Life and Love will ultimately prevail.