

A Daring Misunderstanding

(John 2: 13-22)

There are times when we completely misunderstand what is going on around us. We think we get it, we watch an event or hear about something and we think to ourselves, “I know why that happened” or “I get it”, only to find out later that we were no where near understanding what happened and why. I remember in the mid-90’s when the Cleveland Browns moved from Cleveland to Baltimore, most of us who were fans thought we understood why the owner was moving the team – he was a greedy son of a gun who wanted more money from the fans to build a new stadium that in our eyes wasn’t needed. It wasn’t until years later, as I was talking to my Grandfather, that I got a better understanding of the story. The owner wasn’t greedy per se – he had been working with the city for years to get a new stadium built, something that was sorely needed, only to watch the city build stadiums for the other two sports teams – neither of which were as successful or economically impactful as the Browns. While some

fans will never forgive Art Modell for moving our beloved team – I learned to see what happened with new and different eyes.

As we read the gospels, over and over again, we read stories of people seemingly misunderstanding what Jesus is doing and what Jesus is saying. John's gospel is full of stories like that. And today's is no different. Jesus enters the Temple, sees the moneychangers and merchants in the Court of the Gentiles and goes off. He is angrier than any where else in the gospels about what is happening. He goes and finds some cord, makes a whip, and starts smashing and trashing the courtyard and the merchant tables. He overturns tables, drives out the merchants and the moneychangers and generally creates havoc in the Temple for the day. The religious leaders who were there wondered by what authority Jesus thought he could clean house like that. Jesus responds with an ambiguous answer about tearing down the Temple and the leaders miss his meaning. Unfortunately, I think we do too.

One common understanding of this story/event is that Jesus is so put out with the fact that there is trade going on in the Temple, a place where there should only be prayer and attentiveness to God, that he blows his top. That is the typical interpretation we have that leads us as churches to keeping out of doing anything that looks like we are a “business” rather than a church. The problem with that view is in the context of the event. It’s Passover, a season of pilgrimage for the people. When thousands of people are traveling from all over the region to come to the Temple to offer an unblemished sacrifice and pay the Temple taxes, it’s not like they don’t need people to sell them livestock and to change their coins. Imagine trying to travel weeks with a lamb all the while making sure that nothing happened to it, so it would be acceptable for the sacrifice. I don’t know how anyone might do that. Coins without the image of Caesar were needed to pay the Temple tax, so people were needed to exchange coins. Jesus knew this, and knew it was needed for the travelers and pilgrims. I don’t know how upset he was about the whole economics of the event. What I think he was

upset at was at the leadership. While all this economic exchange was necessary, it wasn't necessary in the Temple courts. It could easily have been done outside the Temple, in the streets surrounding it, instead of inside and in the court where those who followed God but were not of the chosen people of Israel were supposed to be able to pray and worship. But it was a matter of convenience. It was simply easier to allow the exchanges to happen in the courtyards rather than in the streets. And that convenience made it easier for the religious leaders to slip into a marriage with the empire. And that was Jesus problem. The religious leaders had become too comfortable with the established ways of doing things to see that there might be something wrong with what they were doing.

Jesus was standing on the footsteps of the prophets of Israel, calling out the leadership. He stands in that line today, as he calls us out as well. You see these words aren't simply to those who led the Temple, there are also to us who lead the church. There are to those who fall into the comfortable

established ways of being church, who choose not to rock the proverbial boat, and allow the Church universal to forget its call to stand on the margins and to act for justice for all. Jesus is out in the streets turning over our comfortable ways of being and shouting to us to not get too comfortable. Jesus wants us to change, to open our eyes and to move beyond ourselves and into the world of God's good justice. But we are comfortable in our ways, and we are comfortable in what we do. We are too worried about our "temples" and not worried enough about our people. Jesus isn't upset at the merchants, he's upset at the leadership. And he dares them to be different.

Jesus dares the religious leaders to tear down what they know, to take it apart and to open their eyes to see through God's. They don't understand. And neither do we. We too often miss what Jesus is calling us to do, how Jesus is calling us to change, where Jesus is leading us. We're comfortable, we're happy, and we don't realize there is a problem until it's too late. Jesus dares us to tear down our

Temples and let him rebuild them, with our eyes on God, and God's love, grace, hope, and care for all.

The leaders of the city of Cleveland acted too late to keep the Browns from moving. The religious leaders missed what Jesus was doing. John tells us that even the disciples misunderstood at the time, it wasn't until later that they began to understand what Jesus did. How can we keep our eyes open to what Jesus is doing? How might we better understand what Jesus is calling for us to be? Or are we simply too comfortable to listen? Do we dare to let Jesus tear us down so that we might be reborn? My prayer is we open ourselves to the possibilities, that we hear Jesus words of frustration toward us and allow him to change our ways. Amen.