

St. David's Episcopal Church, Radnor, PA
3 Lent, Year B, March 4, 2018
Text: John 2:13-22

Every time I read this scripture, I see with vivid memory a picture of this Bible story, a picture I received as a child.

It happened in a small – actually tiny – wooden church on a dirt road – a one-room white building with green shutters. The entire congregation of twenty were gathered for the Sunday school hour spread around the church according to age groupings but none very far from the pot-bellied stove in the center of the room.

Everyone studied the Bible, studied the lives of Biblical personalities and what made them God-fearing heroes and heroines, and thus important people in God's unfolding plan for the world. But the important thing to a child of nine was the pictures and the religious comic-papers we took home each Sunday. There were no projects, no arts and crafts – no room for that. But each Sunday we received a picture of the person or incident we studied.

On this Sunday, I got a picture of Jesus cleansing the temple. In the picture, there is Jesus, robes flying behind him indicating that he is moving swiftly through the temple. Some tables are overturned on the floor, and one is in the process of tipping over. There is money rolling on the floor, doves flying in the air, and broken bird cages scattered about the floor. Cattle and sheep are running freely through the temple as I notice broken cattle pens in the background. The picture is an action scene filled with great frenzy and deep emotion. There is a look of surprise on the faces of the disciples, a look of great fear on the faces of the moneychangers and dove salesmen, and a look of anger and revenge on the faces of the Scribes and Pharisees. And in the middle of that picture stands Jesus with his whip-hand raised, the cord of the whip swung back ready to strike. On Jesus' face is a look that both contradicts and complements the taut, rigid posture of his body.

This picture bothers me. Jesus is not supposed to get angry. He is not supposed to throw things around and arm himself with a weapon – a whip. We studied that he stilled a violent storm, healed a sick woman, helped a man filled with demons, gave hearing and sight to those without, and used his hands to bless and welcome children. This angry Jesus is not the Jesus we love. "What has gotten into him?"

And I'm still asking that question. Why is Jesus so angry? Aren't we – aren't all Christians – supposed to keep the peace at all cost? Isn't that what we practice? Don't we keep the peace at the cost of pretending things are all right even when they aren't? And isn't it a fact that we often keep peace by avoiding truth, by not holding ourselves – and certainly not others – accountable to the teachings of Jesus? If we, the church that Jesus established, will sacrifice truth in order to keep peace, then why is Jesus so angry in this story? Why doesn't he just turn his head and walk away – like we do?

Well, first, let's clear up a misconception often associated with this story. Jesus is not upset about the sale of sacrificial animals at the temple or the practice of changing money. The hordes of pilgrims that come to the temple need a place to buy the cattle, sheep and doves required by Scripture for burnt offerings to God (see Leviticus, Chapters 1 & 3 for all those details). It isn't practical to bring these sacrifices along on a pilgrimage. And since the temple tax cannot be paid in Greek or Roman coinage – coins bearing the image of the emperor – places to exchange money for temple script are also necessary. Selling sacrifices and exchanging money are simple, necessary systems.

But the systems is corrupt. The rate of exchange is rigged. The people are being exploited, ripped off. The moneychangers no longer care about the temple of God or about pilgrims making sacrifice to God. They care only for their profits.

Now I'm sure the religious leaders would respond to this accusation with: "Well yes, the system has gone a little awry, but it is a system that works. Besides, the institution has been in place generation after generation. And after all, institutions – not the individuals being cheated – have a survival value over time, so don't monkey with the system."

But Jesus does monkey with it. He is more interested in justice and truth than in keeping the peace. If we look honestly at the scriptures, Jesus is never a keeper of the peace. He is always in the faces of the Pharisees and other religious leaders. All of his teachings and his healing upset the status quo. He makes relative things that the religious leaders had taught as absolutes. He makes malleable things people had been taught for generations were concrete. He teaches people to quit being hostages to status quo, and to seek reform and renewal. Jesus causes consternation among many, and few in Palestine would labeled him a peacekeeper. If anything, the institutionalized religious leaders of the day probably are seen as the peacekeepers. After all, they are the ones who try to pacify the Romans and to minimize their control of the country and the temple.

So, if Jesus is always stirring up trouble, what is so uncomfortable with this confrontational, angry Jesus? Does the story pinch and cause uneasiness because it reminds us how often we attempt to keep peace at the risk of truth? Is it because Jesus is willing to sacrifice peace in order to make the temple what God intends it to be, and that goes contrary to how most of us practice our faith?

Or perhaps today's institutional church has just become more important than truth? Perhaps we have become so embedded in this institution that we too want no one to monkey with the system. Perhaps we are content with an institutional veneer of peace and want to be oblivious to the individual truths, accountability, and love this peacekeeping covers up. This is certainly the issue that Jesus drew attention to in first-century Judaism and I suspect it is characteristic of committed individuals and faith communities everywhere. We all want to equate the authority of our own institutions with the presence and authority of God. And as soon as we do so, like the temple of Jesus' day, we lose our way – We become keepers of the status quo, peacekeepers and not peacemakers.

And that's Jesus' message to us today: "Be peacemakers, not peacekeepers. Jesus wants us to be a people who live God's love because we have an unmediated, unbrokered relationship with God. And even though he told us to turn the other cheek, this does not mean we ignore truth and justice to keep the peace. Jesus wants us to know God as he himself does – in an intimate, immediate, uncluttered, childlike way. He knows that only this kind of frictionless relationship can turn us from peacekeepers into peacemakers. And he wants us to be peacemakers, people who stand firm for truth in spite of popular opinion, who turn injustice into justice, corruption into good.

That's what Jesus is so angry about this morning. There are just too many peacekeepers. Let us become peacemakers.

Amen.