

We are so ready, people are, to create divisions: us versus them; *we*—who do it right—versus *those* who do it wrong. This is such a natural human tendency that the Gospel story makes sense to those of us who surely are on the side of right in this story. But this is not a story about separation. This is not a story about some people being right and others being wrong. This is not a story about punishment and reward. These are all interpretations based on fear, not love.

In the other three Gospels, this episode comes at the *end* of Jesus' ministry, but here in John, the scene *opens* Jesus' public ministry. In the passage just before this, Jesus has revealed his Divine nature to the disciples at the wedding in Cana in an expression of God's overabundant love. Today, we find him in the temple, whip in hand.

For nearly 2,000 years, people have been trying to make sense of Jesus' actions. Perhaps the most persistently stubborn explanation in popular Christian folklore for Jesus' behavior is that this is the one act in the life of Jesus that justifies violence against other people. I recently saw a poster that showed Jesus furiously bringing his whip down on a person whose upraised hand was clearly begging for mercy. The caption read, "If anyone ever asks you, 'What would Jesus do?' remind them that flipping over tables and chasing people with a whip is within the realm of possibilities." Inducing fear and inflicting violence against helpless people is not what this story is about. Critics of Christianity use this incident to indict Jesus and Christian scripture as inherently violent. Some Christians use this passage to justify the notion that Christianity is somehow better or more pleasing to God than Judaism. Fearfully assigning blame or claiming supremacy are not what this story is about.

Theologians at least as far back as Martin Luther and John Calvin have argued for vastly different interpretations of Jesus' behavior based on God's unifying love. As recently as 50 years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King and other church leaders *showed* us a

far more redemptive way to live out this episode in our own lives; to follow Christ in love, even while expressing frustration and anger at a broken and unjust system.

To see John's Gospel from a loving perspective, we have to begin with the proper context. When this account was written, Mediterranean Jews were in a particularly rich exploration of what it meant to be Jewish. For most first century Jews, the temple was exactly where God lived, just as Solomon had intended when he built the first temple. The Babylonians destroyed the first temple and took many educated, upper and middle-class Jews with them back to Babylon, where the captives were surprised to experience God's presence. The experience of some of returning exiles persuaded them that God was always with them—temple or no temple. Now, while they were gone, and not long before Jesus was born, Herod the Great had started a colossal restoration and expansion of the temple that was still underway while Jesus was alive.

So our Gospel reading is about Judeans of the Second Temple period when several expressions of Judaism were in, shall we say, "conversation" with each other. But for all of them, the Passover reference carried meaning that did not need to be written into the story. Passover is a week-long spring festival that celebrates the exodus from Egypt, and is closely associated with liberation from oppression and divine salvation. The guiding principle for ethical behavior for all Jews is the very first line we heard from the book of Exodus this morning: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery..." Because God liberated the people from slavery, they were to liberate others. Jews from all over were required to return to Jerusalem for the Passover festival to be reminded of that covenant promise.

Liberation and salvation for all people. This is the flavor of the celebration going on when Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now, this story appears in all four Gospels, but there are some nuances and details that show up only in John's version. Three of those details lead to some compelling insights.

Here is the first detail: As Jesus enters the temple, John tells us that Jesus “found people selling cattle, sheep and doves” and then that Jesus made a rope whip and “drove all of them out of the temple, both sheep and cattle.” But Jesus did not drive all the people out—only the livestock—because immediately after driving “all of them out,” Jesus speaks to people selling doves. And there are others still present—the people who ask him for a sign and the money-changers.

And that brings us to the second detail: After driving out the animals, Jesus pours out the money-changers’ coins and overturns their tables. In the other three Gospels, the money-changers are charging exorbitant fees, which is the reason Matthew, Mark and Luke give for Jesus’ anger. In John’s Gospel, corruption is possible, but not explicit. Now, there is an ironic twist in the use of the Greek word that is most often translated as "overturn." This word is used only two other times in Christian scripture and in both those cases, most English bibles translate the word as "upset." Rather than whipping the money-changers, Jesus has upset the entire system—perturbed the process, for just a short time, which is what must happen for any system to prepare for change, to be open to healing or innovation.

And that leads us to our third detail: Jesus responds to those who ask for a sign by saying, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” There are a few Greek words that mean “destroy,” but the word that John chose has more than one meaning, the most common of which is “to unbind; to loose.” John’s Gospel uses exactly the same word when Jesus commands the crowd to *unbind* Lazarus as he comes out of the tomb. The word appears only one other time in the Gospels when Mark’s Jesus tells the disciples to *untie* the colt that he will ride into Jerusalem.

With those details in mind, we can imagine Jesus, after having chased off all the sacrificial animals and briefly disrupted the system saying this to the people: “Set this temple free; unbind this holy house of God, and in three days, I will raise it up.”

Liberation and salvation for all people; the essential focus of Passover. *That's* what this story is about.

The temple that Jesus loved so dearly had become hide-bound and the people who came to worship had become divisive. Even the architectural layout of the temple was based on protected degrees of worthiness. At the very center was the Holy of Holies, which only the high priest could enter, and then only one day each year. That room was enclosed by an inner court reserved for only the priests and the Levites. Both those were surrounded by a court reserved for circumcised Jewish men. And finally, all the other inner rooms were bounded by the court for Jewish women that had a gallery on the edges for those times of ritual impurity that prevented women from entering to worship. Outside the temple proper was a large, open-air outer court, called the court of the Gentiles. This was where the sacrificial animals were bought and sold, and Roman money exchanged for temple money. There was a sign at the entrance to the temple from the Court of the Gentiles warning non-Jews that they would be punished by death if they entered.

And so the temple captured in stone what religions invariably do, and what comes to each of us so naturally; create degrees of insiders and outsiders. The tendency is so strong that we still want this Gospel story to be about those who do it right—*us*—versus those who do it wrong—*them*. We just seem to have some innate need to name or create some category of sinner or group of heretics against which to compare ourselves.

Perhaps that's why it is so hard for us to accept or even begin to see really see what a radical reformer Jesus was. He showed no interest in closed systems of any kind. He actively upset these systems, even disrupting his own followers when they wanted to persecute others. Only with hindsight, could the disciples make out the pattern of the crucifixion and resurrection in this story. Liberation and salvation for all people; the essential focus of the new Passover—our Pascha, or Easter.

By the time John's Gospel was written, the Second Temple had already been destroyed during the Siege of Jerusalem. The temple has never been rebuilt, but two great traditions emerged from that first century crucible: first, Rabbinic Judaism, the religious ancestors of the Pharisees who replaced the Temple with synagogues, and who replaced sacrifice with prayer service and study. And, second, a new religion borne of Judaism, Christianity.

Both traditions hold that the temple is not needed. For those who hope to follow Christ, we are to become God's temple in the world—a world tormented by division, exclusion and fear. Christ *is* the offer of unity, the open invitation and the living house of love itself. Because Christ has liberated us and has raised us with him, we disrupt the system when we move toward the world's brokenness, when we cry out against injustice, when we live lives that say, "There is no person who should not be lifted up in gratitude to the loving God who gives us all life; there is no darkness in which the light cannot be revealed; there is no life that does not matter nor a death that cannot bear fruit."