

**When Repentance is Public
John 2:13-25**

**Third Sunday in Lent
Dr. Don Flowers, Jr.
Port Williams United Baptist Church**

I have shared with some of you my fear that one day I am going to be sitting in my office, doing minister kinds of things when there is a knock on the door. I get up, walk over and open the door and am greeted by an officer of the RCMP. He is standing there in his red serge, the hat, the whole works!

(And yes I know that is only on ceremonial occasions, but this is my fear and so that is how he appears!)

He introduces himself and then says:

“Rev Flowers, I am very sorry to be the one who has the responsibility to inform you, that’s, and I am very sorry to tell you, but, Rev. Flowers, as much as we have appreciated all that you have done for this community, I am sorry to tell you that you have to leave Canada, because, well, Rev. Flowers, I am sorry to say, you just aren’t nice enough!”

And I would understand! Canadians are so nice! I mean, your niceness puts southern manners to shame! We were taught to say “Yes sir,” and “No Madame.” We were taught to hold the door open. Our Scout troop was always told to leave our campsite better than we found it. We were taught to always always always follow the rules. As a Youth Minister I always said that my major rule was to be respectful of person, place and things.

After all, that pretty much sums up what it means to be a good Christian, right?

So what are we supposed to do with our gospel lesson this morning?

This is one of those stories that is told in every gospel. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all tell the story of Jesus cleansing the temple. They all tell the story. They may use different words, but they all tell the story. With one HUGE difference.

The synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, place this event during Holy Week. Jesus has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and then cleanses the temple. For those writers this event is seen as the final provocative event that precipitated his arrest, trial and crucifixion. This was why the temple leaders decide he had to go!

But John...

John places this even in Chapter 2 of his gospel. It is at the very beginning! Jesus had gone to a wedding in Cana in Galilee; then it was time for Passover, and so Jesus went to celebrate in Jerusalem.

And we know what happened!

Jesus wasn’t nice!

He comes into the temple and immediately made a whip and began driving everyone out of the temple! This is not Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild! No this is Jesus Gone Wild! Tables are overturned, cash boxes spilled all over the pavement, coins rolling beneath cages, lost forever. Lambs go running, doves fly away. People are screaming, trying to get away from this deranged man! It is absolute chaos!

In John's gospel this is the second thing that Jesus does, not one of the last.

And how Jesus describes it is different in John's telling. The other gospels say that Jesus said you have turned the temple into a den of thieves.

A den of thieves is not somewhere you want to go, where you would allow your children to go. It conjures up all kinds of nefarious images—guns and drugs and stolen merchandise. The lighting is bad and people are unbathed and adorned with tattoos that would embarrass your mother. A den of thieves is a place where the police patrol—but never get out of their cars. A den of thieves...No one wants to go there?

But John's Jesus says, "You've turned it into a marketplace."

I will say that one of our favorite Saturday morning events is to go down to the Wolfville Farmers Market. What a delightful place! You can get vegetables fresh from local farms, meat, fish (we got some scallops from Digby just last week.). You can find apples and apple juice; soap, candles, jewelry.

You can find a meal! Often the Noodle Guy is there, and the Taj Mahaj Catering and Sarang Korean Dishes—it is an international food court! You can get your wine from our local vineyards, or if you want something stronger Barrel Tides will be happy to help you out. If you want something to wake you up well you have TAN coffee!

And it isn't just you! There are places you can get healthy food and toys for your dog! And the whole time one of our wonderful local musicians is playing away.

Ahh, a marketplace is a wonderful place!

And that is where Jesus makes a mess!

We have to wonder what was going on? What did Jesus see as so horrible about the way things were, the way things had been for so long, the way things had worked well for so long?

It was a system designed to assist in temple worship. You came to the temple, as we have learned, to offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin. Only if you were traveling from Galilee, or Egypt, it wasn't feasible to bring along a lamb or a dove. Then there was the temple tribute that had to be offered, and that could only be given in temple currency, without the emperor image.

Both of these requirements were from Torah.

So to assist in worship, to make sure that worship happened, merchants were available to help you exchange money. There were shopkeepers available to assist you with an animal to sacrifice—a lamb, or if you were poor a dove. This was just the way things operated. It was the way things were done. In order for the temple system to survive these

business transactions were essential. And the merchants didn't see anything wrong with it. There wasn't anything wrong with it. It was just how things were done! It is what it is.

And although I hate to mix and match gospels, really believing that we have to take each story on their own merit, forgive me a Marcan here. Do you remember the message Jesus came proclaiming from a couple weeks ago, after his baptism, after he heard that affirming voice from God, after his time in the wilderness when he figured out who he was and what his message was going to be? Do you remember?

*"The kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and believe in the good news."*¹

The kingdom of God has come near. You can almost see it. Turn around, don't go in the same old way you have been going, been living. Turn around, do things differently, trusting that is what God wants.

Most of the time we have thought of repentance, metanoia, as individuals. We are called to repent for our sins, my sing. I need to turn around, to do things differently. And I do. We do.

But we do. Not just all of us as individuals, but we. All of us. Corporately!

We have to be willing to confess that the ways we have been doing things, the very structures by which we function, our society functions, they are not the way of God!

It doesn't take us long to see examples, does it? In this past year how often have we been reminded how many times we have failed to honor our fathers and our mothers. The news out of Northwoods, where so many of Nova Scotia's Covid victims lived has pointed that out. And it isn't like someone set down and said, "Let's design a system that will systematically kill old people!"

No! It wasn't an evil plan. It was done with the best of intentions. How do we care for our elders when they can't take care of themselves any longer; when their children have moved to the oil fields of Alberta to find work; when their care is beyond what is possible at home.

But now? Can we imagine something different? Are we willing to go a different way?

When the planters arrived in Nova Scotia they came escaping the turmoil and conflict in the post war years in the US. They came for opportunity, to farm. I am not sure they had in their minds that they would drive the indigenous people from their land, that they would subject them to centuries of discrimination and abuse. I really believe that the horrific residential schools were designed with the best of intentions, narrow minded, but not nefarious. The same thing with the controversy over moderate livelihood. It had good intention, a rationale for all.

But now? Can we imagine something different? Are we willing to go a different way?

Many churches were founded in a time where there were few who knew how to read, often the minister, who was always a man. It was how life was. But now we see that

¹ Mark 1:15. NRSV

devotion to the way things were tearing congregations apart when the spirit has been poured out on their sons and their daughters! We have so long viewed family as a man and a woman and 2.3 children, because that's what it was.

But now? Can we imagine something different? Are we willing to go a different way?

In John's gospel this episode is used to announce that things aren't the same anymore. Jesus is the beginning of a new era, one in which the grace of God is no longer mediated through cultic worship, the way it had been for so long. Now God's grace was breaking out in public.

We call this the cleansing of the temple, an interesting phrase don't you think. It wasn't as much a cleansing as it was a disruption.

Which is exactly what repentance is. It is a disruption in the way life has been, for us, and for the world. So what would it be like if we were that disruption? What if we made a scene to be public about who we say we are, what we say we believe?

What if we put a banner up outside during Pride to let people know about our inclusion statement?

What if we moved beyond land acknowledgment to stand with our indigenous neighbors when we hear of reports of missing women?

What if we were in the front of the march for Black Lives Matter whenever there is another incident of harassment, profiling, discrimination.

What if we were like Jesus and just raised a ruckus of repentance?

Would it make a difference?

Who knows!?! But we would know. We would know that in listening to the loving gracious call of God to our lives we are going to go a different way, in our lives, and in our world. We are going to treat others the way they should be treated in God's beloved community. We are repenting, going a different way.

Will it matter?

The next day as the sun rose over Jerusalem the money changers were back with their tables. The livestock operations were there with their sheep, doves, pigeons. From all appearance that Jesus tantrum had just been one of those things.

But people remembered. Years later they still talked about that man who went wild in the temple. They told the story about how he was delirious talking about how he would refill the temple in 3 days. And a few people would laugh.

Whatever happened to him, someone would ask.

Well, someone would say.....let me tell you a story.