

October 22, 2017

“Actions Speak Louder Than Words”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 2:13-22

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Well, this certainly is a Jesus we don't often see, or want to see, is it? Jesus, acting like...like we do sometimes... human. Getting angry, really angry, going into the temple and taking some drastic action by taking some rope and making it into a whip, physically overturning tables, and literally chasing people out of the temple. Imagine being there, being one of Jesus' disciples and witnessing this sudden, unexpected tirade. I can imagine them saying “Uh oh, this is bad, really bad. The authorities, the merchants, the moneychangers are all going to be really, really mad. Anything can happen now.” They probably felt something like that Southwest Airlines commercial that says, “Wanna get away?” Except they couldn't! Southwest didn't fly to Jerusalem back then! But let's stop and think again. Jesus was fully divine, yes; but Jesus was also fully human. And because of that, he felt the same full range of human emotions that you and I feel, including anger. The great theologian John Calvin summed it up perfectly: “Christ has put on our feelings, along with our flesh.” “Christ has put on our feelings, along with our flesh.”

Because look at his life - full of feelings. At the wedding at Cana, don't you think Jesus showed emotion – talking and smiling and laughing and maybe even dancing? I think so. He didn't turn that water into wine for nothing you know. And remember when his good friend Lazarus died, we're told that Jesus was “deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.” He was emotionally distraught, and he openly cried! Sometimes he got frustrated and had to admonish his disciples, like the time Peter argued with him about why he had to die. And Jesus angrily reprimanded Peter, by saying, “Get thee behind me Satan.” Sometimes he was even gruff and off-handed like when he told a foreign woman who wanted her daughter healed, “I was sent only to the house of Israel,” meaning only the Jewish people. And probably the insensitive way he said it warranted a sharp retort, and she came back at Jesus with the comment, “Even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from the table.” Jesus got the point and maybe even a little come-uppance at the same time. And there's more. Like the time he witnessed the faith of the centurion, and became so pleased that “he marveled” – what a wonderful expression. I can almost see the joy on Jesus' face, so delighted because of what the centurion had said and the fact that this man got the whole point of who Jesus was. And of course there was the time in the Garden of Gethsemane that Jesus so feared for his life and had doubts about his purpose that he “offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears.”

So then, what are we to make of this ‘cleansing the temple’ incident in Jesus’ life, one that is considered by many as “over the top.” You know, we often use the old adage, “Actions speak louder than words.” And throughout history this simple yet profound truth has been stated in many ways. There’s an ancient Chinese proverb that says, “Talk doesn’t cook rice.” The great writer Shakespeare said, “Action, more than words, is eloquence.” Benjamin Franklin said, “Well done is better than well said.” And in this particular case, Jesus is speaking with his actions by turning over some tables. Now some say Jesus was overtaken by “righteous anger.” Perhaps. But Jesus could have displayed a “righteous anger” so many other times as well, yet he didn’t. Not when the men in his synagogue ran him out of town and almost over a cliff because they didn’t like what he preached; not when he was betrayed by one of his closest followers; not through the mockery of a trial; not even when he was unjustly hung on the cross and watched as soldiers ridiculed him and gambled for his meager possessions. So why now, why the temple - God's house?

Well I’ll tell you what I think. I think it comes down to his zeal, his passion to deliver to humankind the most important message we will ever hear. His message that – if we ever hope to fully experience and live in the Kingdom of God, both now and especially for eternity in heaven, then we better get our spiritual life, our spiritual house in order. And we’d better do it now. Jesus’ anger in the temple conveys a sense of urgency because, even though this is the most critical message we will ever hear, people just aren’t listening, aren’t getting it. Not even those in the temple. They’re going about their same old day-to-day routines, living as though what they do in this life has no bearing on their eternal life. And so, Jesus specifically chose the temple – God’s house, as the place for his actions to speak. The temple, where the religious leaders and scribes and hypocrites sat and pontificated and where the poor came to beg at their feet; where the devout came to pray and the not so devout came to socialize; where the humble widow quietly gave her last coin, and where the rich boastfully displayed their wealth; where the whole of society could be characterized by their comings and goings. And where the whole spectrum of humanity’s faults and shortcomings were made so blatantly obvious to Jesus. Things like spiritual complacency, misplaced allegiances, smug self-satisfaction, pathetic excuses, greed, judgment and more. Yes, this temple needs cleansing, and so Jesus acts to put God’s house, this spiritual house, in order. And here, through this incident, contrary to what you first may have thought, Jesus’ actions speak volumes about his love for humankind. A love that consumed him, because he so desperately wanted people to take his message about the Kingdom of God to heart. But his mere human

words apparently weren't strong enough, weren't motivating enough. So in his zeal, in his passion, in his love, he comes in and stirs things up – a lot! And we react by being shocked and taken aback.

United Methodist Bishop Will Willimon addresses this when he writes, “It is odd that we have made Jesus (Christ) into such a quivering mass of affirmation and oozing graciousness, (especially) considering how frequently, unguardedly, and gleefully Jesus told us that we were sinners. Anyone who thinks that Jesus was into total inclusiveness, self-affirmation, and open-minded, heart-happy acceptance has then got to figure out why we responded to him by nailing him on a cross. You see, he got there not for urging us to “consider the lilies (of the field),” but for calling us “whitewashed tombs who are clean on the outside (and unclean on the inside)” and even worse. (So is it) such a mystery that (over the ages) we have attempted – Scripture be damned – to produce a promiscuously permissive, user-friendly Jesus.”

And so, you know what? I think Jesus wanted to shock us. Shock us into action. Shock us into examining our own spiritual house. Our hearts, our minds, our attitudes, our decisions, our motivations. He wants us to look at what needs cleansing. Jesus is trying to get us to turn some of our own tables, and make the changes we need to make in our lives. For could it be that when we look inside the deepest parts of our very being, we realize that we too need to turn our tables of spiritual complacency, misplaced allegiances, smug self-satisfaction, pathetic excuses, greed, judgment and more. We need to turn those tables that have erected a barrier between us and God and between us and one another. We need to turn the tables of our sin and put our spiritual house in order. So that we can experience and enjoy and live in the Kingdom of God, that begins here and now, in this life, and that we will see fully realized in the next. And we need to do it now, before it's too late.

Let me close with Bishop Willimon again. He writes, “Early in my ministry, I served a little church in rural Georgia. One Saturday we went to a funeral at a little country church not of my denomination. I had never been to a funeral like this one. The casket was open during the funeral, and the preacher delivered a sermon. He pounded on the pulpit and looked over at the casket. He said, 'It's too late for Joe. He might have wanted to get his life together. He might have wanted to change things, but he's dead now. It is too late for him, but it is not too late for you. There is still time for you. You can still decide. You're still alive. It is not too late for you. So today is the day to get your life together. It's too late for old Joe, but it's not too late for you.' Willimon said, “I was so angry with that preacher. On the

way home, I told my wife, 'Have you ever seen anything as manipulative and insensitive to that poor family? I found it disgusting.' She said, 'I agree. I've never heard anything like that. It was manipulative. It was disgusting. It was insensitive. And worst of all... it was also true.'"¹

Isn't it time for all of us to start overturning some tables today! Amen.

¹ Willimon, William H.; from the sermon *The Writing on the Wall*